Take It Back Now Y'all

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Time Travel, to call this a fix-it is disingenuous but it is in the spirit, the OCs are kind of filler but also not if that makes sense, more tags as the situation develops, i'm just gonna slide in the, Slow Burn, tag because this is going to be a long build-up to Something, Canon-Typical Violence, but more like Tim's normal than Bruce's, Just So We're Clear, BAMF Tim Drake, Tim Drake-centric, Implied/Referenced Underage Prostitution, Unreliable Narrator, Hey you reading this look at me, you see that Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings tag up there?, I mean that, there is potentially upsetting content in here that is not tagged here, and i'm not Going to tag it, there's chapter warnings in places but i'm not adding anything else, read at your own risk and stop leaving comments telling me how to tag my work, its like this on purpose

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Take It Back Now Y'all

by TimTheToaster (tabletoptime)

Summary

There was absolutely no way this sunshine was from Gotham in April.

Not possible.

Which meant, Tim was no longer in Gotham, in April.

(In which Tim finds himself in the past, and tries to do the right thing. It's more complicated than he'd like.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was absolutely no way this sunshine was from Gotham in April.

Not possible.

Which meant, Tim was no longer in Gotham, in April.

One deep breath confirmed it to be Gotham's particular tangy chemical smog (though even that seemed lighter, was it a trick of the sun or was the air actually different? He needed a lab to check), so he hadn't moved much geographically, but that still left the problem of the weather.

If Tim had to hazard a guess, he would call this early June, before the serious summer storms and the heat picked up enough to dye the sky interesting colours through the city's miasma. The question, then, was if he had lost time, or gained it.

At least he was in costume, so he had something in the way of resources. Enough to get him started, though certainly not enough to establish a base of operations if his luck was as bad as usual. Tim wasn't holding out hope for things to be easy. They rarely were.

Cape and cowl weren't conducive to wandering the streets during the day, so he was going to have to sneakily swap those out for a jacket. His armoured leggings and boots could pass as normal pants in a pinch, but there was no way he could pretend either the tunic or the undersuit shirt weren't part of a costume. They were also nearly

skintight, and he'd feel weird wearing them casually.

So, a jacket.

He ducked deeper back into the alley he had awoken in and scaled the fire escape to the roof, sticking to the shadows as best he could. A glance around put him a couple blocks over from where he had last thought he was, on the edge of the South City Park. Not a great area to find clothes unless he was willing to raid someone's picnic.

…

He was gonna have to raid someone's picnic. At least he would leave a little cash behind so they could get a new one.

After very carefully scoping out the groups in the park (and there were a lot of them, mostly families, so it was probably a Sunday while Tim had been pretty sure it was a Friday night), Tim decided he could take a track jacket from a family that looked comfortably middle class. It might have something to do with the fact that it was a black jacket with red accents. Tim admitted nothing.

Cape folded and tucked away in his harness, which he was wearing as a rather tacky layered belt, and jacket zipped despite the heat, Tim stepped onto the streets of Midtown proper.

He had a lot of investigating to do before nightfall.

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The good news, was it didn't take long to figure out exactly when he was.

The newspaper boxes on 87th still had a few copies, and they were kind enough to tell him it was indeed Sunday, June 10.

The bad news was he was twelve years in the past, and with no clear explanation for *why* .

He had gone back and scoured the alley he had woken up in, discreetly scanning it for any abnormal radiation, but the equipment he had on hand just didn't have the power to detect anything in trace amounts. And if magic was involved he had nothing that would give him any indication at all.

Dick was Robin. Dick was Robin and *tiny* , oh god how could Bruce have ever let him out on the streets? And the scaly panties. Tim completely understood the rumours that never went away about the exact nature of Batman and Robin's relationship. What responsible father-figure let their child fight criminals without pants on? Bruce, apparently.

The time period did explain why the air was cleaner; Gotham hadn't had to face years of chemical attacks yet.

The walk through the streets was a head-trip. Stores he had only seen in their twilight days, barely managing to keep their doors open, were bustling and full. The tension in people's shoulders was lighter, not gone- this was still Gotham- but looking out for pickpockets, not mass shootings. Half the places he passed that would one day be safe houses in condemned buildings were still full apartment complexes.

The next question was how was Tim supposed to get home? This was

well before time travel was a regular part of anyone's day-to-day, and it wasn't like Tim knew much about it. He could work the technology when it was in front of him, but actually building it? He had left sourcing the equipment to Booster Gold, Rip Hunter, and his buddies when rescuing Bruce from the timestream.

It would take years of research to build a time machine.

Gotham had never been a shining bastion, and Tim knew the crime statistics over the last three decades by heart. This period, the first few years of Batman and Robin's presence on the streets, was the lowest Gotham's stats had been since the murder of the Waynes. It was just before things started to get crazy in terms of costumed lunatics. Oh, there were a few running around, but even the ones there were hadn't escalated to big double digit kill counts yet. Yet.

Maybe he could try and get the Flash to run him home.

Except he was pretty sure Barry's only run-ins with time travel thus far had been very very unpleasant, so he really wasn't likely to give Tim the time of day if he asked. While it was tempting to try and force him, there was no way that would end well. Frankly, trying without a cosmic treadmill was asking for trouble anyways.

There was paranoia, and suspicion, but there was also a certain spiteful hope to the people he passed. It was something that got the city through No Man's Land, but Tim hadn't seen much of since. The faith that the world would be okay even if they had to drag it there, kicking and screaming. Gothamites had traded that brutal belief for survival and the bitter refusal to roll over and die. While it did the job, Tim had missed the streetside optimism as his own had dwindled.

He could try and get the time authorities to give him a ride, but how to contact them?

The fastest way was just to fuck with the timeline and hope they noticed, which. Was not ideal for a number of reasons. But it might be kind of fun, and they would make sure he didn't break reality for the worse or anything.

That didn't mean he was going to just go nuts and murder people, but he could let loose a little, right? Just until the Time Masters noticed.

--

There was no way it was this easy to set himself up in Gotham. No way he could just walk into a warehouse and threaten the criminals inside into leaving. Sure he had to punch a few guys, but between some spooky shadows from the rafters and a smoke pellet, he hadn't had to pull out his staff before they ran, tails between their legs.

Even the criminals were less hardened in this time. It made his chest ache.

With his newly acquired warehouse, Tim had some decisions to make.

He could try and play it sneaky, interfere with events he knew were to come, for the better. Or he could generate his own entirely new events. The latter option would stand out more, but only because it was much riskier. The likelihood of damaging the timeline was higher if he actually added things rather than just tweaked events that were already settled in place. So really his best bet would be the former.

It would probably be less fun.

It also suggested that a warehouse might not be the best place to be operating out of. Still, he could keep an eye on this one and re-appropriate it if his needs veered further towards big spaces and storage. For now he probably needed an apartment or something less explicitly sketchy.

Responsibility came first, so Tim supposed he'd have to be smart about this.

In the interest of pretending to be an actual member of society, Tim was going to need some capital. His skin crawled at the possibility of getting an actual job, so he was either going to do some creative lying, or some "unlicensed resource reallocation." The lying would most likely victimize whatever Gothamites he had to, and, while statistically they probably had it coming, he could instead deliberately target an asshole. Tim checked the charge on his overpowered tablet (he had around twenty-seven hours), piggybacked onto a particularly obnoxious satellite, and set to work.

Lex Luthor had the cash to burn.

Now, it was towards the end of Dick's first year as Robin, and there weren't a ton of events that stood out during the next few months. The one that did… Had been kind of formative for Dick as a vigilante, Tim knew.

Two Face.

A little resigned to leaving the warehouse for later, Tim set up some proximity alarms and traps around the doors and windows, and hit the streets again. There weren't really many apartment listings online so he'd have to see what he could find on foot. And he'd feel bad signing a lease on a nice place and then just disappearing. So he'd see what he could find in the neighborhoods where no one would say

anything if he walked out and never came back.

The Narrows, Crime Alley, Old Gotham, the Bowery. Real party places.

Did Tim have the right to mess with an event that had shaped his older brother as a crime fighter, and started the conflict that set Bruce and Dick apart for years?

At least Tim was confident in his abilities to handle his own security, and hey, maybe he could offer to improve the landlord's for cheaper rent. Except that offer in Gotham was likely to get him suspicion and firmly told to fuck off. Maybe he'd just do it discreetly anyways.

On the other hand, Tim had the chance here to lessen his big brother's suffering, even just a little bit, and touching on an event that mattered ought to put him on anyone monitoring the timestream's radar. It was too tempting to pass up.

Kind of like this little vacancy sign. Sign was a little generous, it was a piece of paper taped to the inside of a window on the ground floor. A rundown apartment block Tim remembered buying after it was condemned and remodeling into a Neon Knights center. Two blocks over from Crime Alley proper, which meant it was unlikely to get many Bat sightings. Bruce was sore about patrolling this area until Jason.

And then again, after Jason.

The specifics of the situation weren't as airtight as Tim would have liked. He was going to need a much better grasp on the details of the Gotham mob scene if he wanted to know what he could and couldn't afford to change. At the very least he'd like to avoid or minimize the

time Dent spent kicking the shit out of Dick. And hopefully, you know, save the judge's life. But Tim really wasn't sure he could get away with both without there being major ripples.

The landlady gave him a suspicious look when he haggled her on the rent and then offered to pay the first two months, but she just snapped a warning about not bringing any business home with him and that he would be charged for any smoke damage. At least she hadn't cut power to his unit yet, so the lights would work. He'd get a bill at the end of the month. Gas and water were his problem, which would be fun without a legal identity.

Apparently Tim looked like he was in a gang. Maybe it was the jacket?

He wasn't sure that he could just let those events play out when he knew he could stop them.

Tim had spent most of the past few years refusing to let bad things happen where he could make a difference. Was giving that up selfless, fighting his instincts to preserve the timeline, or selfish, refusing to help those in need, for the hope it would get him home? In fact, did Tim even have the right to go home from here? There was so much *good* he could do, and all it would cost was his whole life. But.

That was the Mission, right?

Standing alone in an empty apartment; two rooms, a hallway, and a bathroom, Tim kind of wanted to cry. The one room had a stove-top oven on the wall, a sink, some cupboards, the fixtures for a fridge, and about sixty five square feet. The bedroom had a window and a closet. The bathroom had a standing shower, a sink, and a toilet. Over all, not the worst place Tim had ever stayed, but something about the shitty linoleum and stained carpet wrapped tight around his throat.

There was a need, and Tim had honed himself into the kind of person who fulfilled needs when he was still just a kid. From there, others had done a lot of the shaping, to remake him to suit themselves, whether they knew it or not. The only problem was Tim wasn't entirely certain what exactly the need here was.

Gotham was *mostly* fine right now. As fine as it ever got.

But Two Face was going to murder a judge and beat Robin. And the gang violence was going to stew and froth and kill people. Destroy families. Batman would fight it, save lives everywhere he could, but people would die. To drugs, guns, chemicals, and supervillains.

One day Robin would die.

They couldn't save everyone.

But they had to try.

That was the mantra that kept Tim moving in the face of grief, time and again.

He'd try to get home, but he couldn't turn his back on all these people he had a second chance to save. He couldn't let them die a second time without even trying.

Tim laid out his belt and harness, unpacking their compartments to do a full inventory. He plugged his tablet into one of the wall outlets. He opened a file for all of the security features he needed to implement

and databases he needed to re-hack.

Best to get started, there was a lot to do.

Chapter End Notes

It's happening, and my life is spiraling out of control. At least I'm posting regularly(ish). University, though. Is unimpressed with me. My second round of midterms approaches and I may vanish for a while, we'll see.

I've been thinking about this AU for an embarrassingly long time, so I am very pleased to get something out for it. Where is it going, well I'm not trying to be subtle, but I'm also not giving the game away yet. Soon.

Once again, many thanks to ReplacementRobin for talking shop with me, and Capes and Coffee for keeping me generally on topic.

Please do leave a comment, or kudos, or even just think positive thoughts at me if you liked it. Everything is appreciated :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim was in the zone and four hours into his online crusade, ignoring the niggling thought that he was going to need a bigger computer, when a knock at his door jolted him back to his surroundings.

He was up and armed in a heartbeat, cycling through who could possibly be at his door at two in the morning. The landlady, changed her mind about letting him live here; an actual gang member, running some kind of protection racket; the authorities, looking for someone. That last one was unrealistic, this was Crime Alley. No cop with any amount of self-preservation would come here at this hour without a lot of back-up and a lot of noise.

Silently, Tim sidled to the door.

At least it had a peephole, since opening doors without looking was a great way to get shot.

Drum roll, please.

It was an old lady with a brown paper bag. Hiding a weapon maybe?

Tim took a moment to lament that he had to wonder if old ladies were trying to kill him, then he cracked the door, throwing disk ready, “Hello?”

They were about the same height, so she met his gaze head on. Her eyes were steely but warm, like a poker left too close to the hearth. “Who are you?”

“Excuse me?” Tim blinked. “You’re the one who knocked on *my* door. What do you want?”

“I’m your neighbor across the hall. The last young man who rented this space brought to our doorstep a bomb of that awful fear gas, and then he hung himself out the window. Despite his claims, I’m fairly sure he was fifteen,” her words weren’t judgmental, but they weren’t gentle. The old Gotham accent shaped the tragedy into a fact of life. “I’ll ask again, who are you?”

Tragedies like that *were* a fact of his life, had been since he first caught a bus into the city to chase capes, since he watched the Graysons fly and fall, but Tim didn't like the reminder that the same was true for most Gothamites. At least he made a choice, they just lived here. "My name's Alvin. Recently aged out of the system. Not interested in bringing any trouble home with me."

Her stare didn't let up. "Neither was he, and you just lied to me. Try again, boy."

He must be more out of it than he thought if was failing to lie to geriatrics. Alvin Draper was the name he gave the landlady, so he couldn't just drop it. Time to double down.

"Alvin *is* my name, but that's stupid so I go by my middle name. Tim. Always annoyed case workers, but I'm not a goddamn chipmunk," he shrugged. There, nice and easy with a hint of teen rebellion. It was odd to let loose the hint of inner city drawl that had mystified and infuriated his parents in equal measure, but it was the right call. Tim felt a little selfish keeping his name, but he figured the universe owed him this much.

That seemed to fly better with the woman. "I'm Maggie. The ovens are temperamental, so if you ever need help, come get me before you set the place on fire. There's usually old furniture by the docks if you can get it back here." She shoved the paper bag into his hands. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

With that she returned to the partially open door across the hall and disappeared. Tim heard the grind of her lock sliding shut.

Well that was. Something.

Tim retreated into his apartment and cautiously opened the paper bag. Inside was a bottle of water, a paper towel, and a small pot pie. It warmed his hands through the bag, just a little.

He wasn't quite lucky enough to warrant a fork, nor was he heathen enough to eat it with his fingers. Convenience stores sold plastic cutlery, right? He'd just run to the 24-hour corner store and pick some up. Maybe some paper plates while he was at it.

Actually, there was a bunch of short-term necessities he should really pick up. He could do a more comprehensive shop during daylight hours. And he should also probably check out the docks for at least a table and a bed frame, since he couldn't picture himself going

furniture shopping. Tim would have to figure something out for a mattress, but he could put that off until he needed to sleep.

If he was quick the pie would still be warm when he got back.

With his mind fixed on the flaky pastry, he slid a couple twenties into his waistband (no pockets unless he was willing to wrestle with his belt and he was not) and slipped out the door, locking it more as a habit than because he thought it would help.

It was late. Prime vigilante hour, a couple hours before the criminals called it a night. Tim moved quickly since he wanted to avoid trouble, though he couldn't deny a thrill of anticipation at the thought of a fight.

Not a great idea for lying low, but a nice pick-me-up.

Tim had passed a couple places on his early wandering, one of which had closed during his second year as Robin. Nostalgia guided his feet to it's barred windows. This place did great calzone-things. Maybe he'd snag one, for old time's sake.

The door opened with a *tinkle*, bells tied to the hinges, and Tim stepped under the buzzing fluorescents. A quick scan to assess the layout before he was moving; snacks near the front and in clear view of the cameras, the day to day was further inside with solid coverage, only one blind spot that contained diapers (a deliberate show of compassion, or deemed too awkward to steal?). He was still in his Red Robin boots, steps silent even on the cracked and peeling vinyl.

To the back of the store. Shelf one; paper towels and cleaning supplies. Things to come back for but not a priority. Shelf two; crackers and cheap non-perishables. Later. Shelf three though? Bingo. Paper plates, plastic cutlery, toiletries.

Tim scooped up a pack of everything on his mental list that he could carry, building a veritable jenga tower in his hands, and returned swiftly to the counter, before it could collapse. As the glazed-eyed cashier started ringing it in, Tim darted over to the heated display and slipped a calzone-thing into a pocket of grease paper. He was there and back between slow blinks.

Tired, tired eyes. "That'll be thirty-six seventy-eight. D'ya want a bag?"

Tim handed the now-rumpled twenties over, with the Gotham

equivalent of a winning smile. That was to say, a flash of teeth with only the barest implications of violence. “Please.”

Shitty plastic bag full of goods and savory pizza-affiliate, acquired.

Humming slightly under his breath, he stepped back onto the street and turned towards his apartment. Thus far the trip had taken ten minutes, so Tim was cautiously optimistic about the temperature of the pie.

With this venture successful, he had basic supplies to start him for tomorrow. Tomorrow he really ought to get his water sorted out and see what he could do about furniture. It’d be an excellent excuse to poke around the docks. Dock workers knew all the best-

The thought was cut off by a man who had been leaning in the shadows stepping into his path with what he probably thought was a menacing grin, and a knife. Did he think Tim hadn’t seen him there?

“Hey there, pretty boy. How ‘bout you hand over the bag, your wallet, and that coat, and you get home in one piece?” he leered, gaze wandering enough to tell Tim what he thought about his *piece*.

Ew.

Still, no need to escalate just yet. “I don’t have my wallet on me, I just brought enough to pick some stuff up. I can give you three bucks in change?”

The slight wrinkle of the man’s eyebrows encouraged Tim to keep going.

He shook the bag. “There’s not even food in here; it’s toiletries, plastic forks, and paper plates. Come on, man, you gonna stab me over some deodorant?”

Knife-guy opened his mouth, brow furrowing deeper, but Tim powered on. “And I one hundred percent stole this jacket, do you really want a third-hand, double-stolen jacket that won’t even fit you?”

“I’ve had enough of your lip!” Whoops, apparently that was a step too logical for Knife-guy, who lunged forward, swinging.

Tim sidestepped the swing and drove the vee of his thumb and forefinger hard into Knife-guy’s throat, sliding behind him smoothly.

Dropped the bag, then two sharp palm-strikes to the back of his neck, a stomp to the back of his knee.

To Knife-guy's credit, he hadn't dropped his weapon and tried to twist to slash at Tim's ankles as he fell.

Without a blink, Tim kicked his wrist, forcing him to drop the weapon and met his temple with a heel on the backswing.

The confrontation was over in six moves and about fifteen seconds.

Sloppy.

He could have ended the fight from the front, a hit to the side of the neck would have been a faster knockout, his boots were armoured enough he could have taken the slash and just gone straight for the head. Tim heard Bruce's voice in his head, critiquing his choices.

He'd work on it.

Tim bent to scoop the knife, because at this point all resources were good resources, when he heard quiet footsteps and the rustle of plastic behind him.

Knife in hand, he spun to see a… ten year old digging through his bag. And his calzone-thing, having spilled out and splattered onto the ground. Kid was probably looking for an alternative.

"Hey, kid," he called to get his attention. The boy's head snapped up, eyes wide and fixed on the knife. Tim slid it blade first into his waistband, hoping he wouldn't have to run and risk cutting his hip. "When was the last time you ate?"

A confused little squint, that was actually pretty adorable. It was like being assessed by a hungry kitten.

"Look. I'm all for eating sidewalk-food, but I live a block and a half that way. Gimme back my bag and I'll share my dinner."

The kid scoffed, which rude but understandable. "You think I'm gonna fall for that?"

Tim didn't hide his grin, sharp and a little conspiratorial. Red Robin's smile. "There's nothing to fall for. I'll go first, but if you try to run with my stuff I'll chase you to get it back. If you drop it and go, I won't follow. The door stays open and I won't even come close enough

to touch you if you don't want me to."

"Promise?" He probably hadn't meant it to sound so vulnerable, but the pleading edge to the word was a fist in Tim's gut.

The grin slipped away and Tim met the boy's eyes, deadly serious. "I promise." A beat, then a little lighter, "Though I think that sidewalk-food is salvageable so I do want to grab that before we head over."

"You're gross. And fine, but if you touch me I'll rip your dick off," the kid snapped, nose scrunched.

If that wasn't a clear and explicit boundary, Tim didn't know what was. Hands held clearly out and open, Tim slowly approached, crouching down to wrap the fallen grease paper around the smooshed calzone-thing. Totally still edible.

Before standing he looked at the kid, only needing to look a little up, "I'm Tim, by the way. You don't have to tell me your name, but you also don't have to call me 'that weird guy.' I guess you could if you want."

"Alright, Weird Guy, lead the way," the kid snarked, hefting the plastic bag onto his shoulder. Okay, Tim had kind of walked into that one. But the tension in the ten year old's stance had abated slightly, so he'd take it.

The walk back was relatively short, the only sound beyond the noises of the city being the light steps behind Tim. He very specifically didn't look, even when they stopped. There was a near miss with another creep in an alley sizing them up, but Tim made eye contact with him and did his best to convey the sheer extent to which trying anything was a bad idea. It seemed to work, but Tim knew better than to consider the matter entirely resolved. Maybe it'd be worth building some kind of reputation if it would let him walk down the street at night without getting harassed every twenty feet.

Something to consider if he was trapped here long.

Also of concern was how his tiny tagalong was planning on getting home. No kid who was out this late had a happy, safe place to return to, Tim would know. That didn't mean Tim could just let him wander around to get stabbed or something. Then again, it wasn't exactly his business.

The solution came to him as it often did; asking himself *what would*

Bruce do? Well Bruce would probably implicitly threaten or intimidate the kid into slightly better behaviour and then adopt him. Offer to teach him to defend himself. He definitely would not speak to the boy's parents, if they were even alive. There would be very little discussion in general and it would be settled before the kid knew what hit him.

Therefore, the best course of action was to not do that, ask the kid what his plans were, and offer to accompany him if his plan sucked. Possibly tail him anyways to make sure he got home safely.

Tim took a moment to be thankful for Bruce's social incompetence as a reverse-guide, then opened his door.

And promptly realized he had forgotten his stuff was strewn across the floor.

"Shit, let me clear this crap up," Tim said, forgoing the lights to stride inside and sweep piles of tech into belt compartments. "I'd offer you a chair or blanket or something but I got the place earlier today."

It took Tim less than a minute to toss anything incriminating into the bedroom, though he noted he was down a throwing disk from his earlier inventory which would be fun to sneak back before the kid left, but by the time he returned the kid's shoulders were tight again.

Not unreasonable, the empty room was kind of ominous in the dark.

With the light switch by the door, Tim couldn't do anything about that, so he gently set Maggie's paper bag in the middle of the room and then backed up to the far wall, retrieving the calzone-thing from where he had set it down. "In there's a pie and a bottle of water the lady across the hall gave me. You can use the stuff in the bag to split it yourself, or you can set the bag next to it and I'll do it."

Slowly, like he was trying to both be cautious and not seem afraid, the boy moved to the paper bag and poked it open, flinching away like he expected it to explode. This was Gotham, maybe he did. After a second with no consequences, he peeked inside and Tim could practically *see* his salivary reflex activating. He looked up quickly at Tim, then back down and swallowed. He carefully placed the plastic bag on the floor and retreated to the doorway.

A distinct burnished gold edge was just visible at the lip of his pocket.

Keeping his gaze on the bags, Tim crossed the room and knelt down.

He took out the paper plates and cutlery, and very carefully split the pie into two pieces, one noticeably larger than the other. There was a slight intake of breath from ahead of him, disappointment in a sigh. Then Tim placed the pieces onto separate plates and pulled back to the wall with one in hand.

“Are you serious?” the boy breathed, like he was looking for the other shoe before it could drop.

No mockery, no joke, Tim met his eyes with level-headed honesty. He nodded, slowly and clearly. “No trick. Do you want me to take a bite first?”

Faster than Tim had seen him move yet, the boy darted forward, grabbing the plate with the larger chunk of oozing pie and a fork. This time, he turned around to return to his place at the threshold.

Tim hated to take advantage of what little trust the boy had given him in looking away, but the opportunity was right there. Channeling every second of stealth training he had ever received, Tim was up and behind the kid in a moment. Free hand- shit he was holding the fork, Tim shoved it in his mouth and cushioned the prongs with his tongue to keep it quiet- *newly* free hand angled with all the skill of a practiced pickpocket to slide the disk out without touching denim.

The window was closing fast, so Tim dipped back to the wall through the shadows that dominated the room. He dropped into a relaxed criss-cross against the wall, without the hall light shining in his eyes and disk hidden beneath him, and took a bite of the pie.

Just in time for the boy to turn back to him.

Suspicion still present, but with a little more openness in his posture, the boy sat down just inside the doorway, out of the shaft of light and parallel to Tim. He took a small bite. Quietly, barely loud enough for Tim to hear him at all, “My name is Luke.”

Just this once, Tim had gotten lucky. The pie was still warm.

Tim carefully swallowed and decided to press his good luck, “Nice to meet you Luke. Do you have a safe place to spend the night?”

Luke’s little fist was white-knuckled around the fork, like it would try to run if he let it. He didn’t break eye contact. “Yes.”

That was a lie.

It was too early to offer to let him sleep here. Luke wouldn't say yes and Tim may never see him again.

"I'm going looking for furniture by the docks tomorrow. I'll stop by the store on 83rd where I picked up this thing," he tapped the unfortunate calzone. "At four. If you're willing to help me get a table and bed frame across the city and up those stairs, I'll order pizza for us both. Maybe some chairs too. Sound fair?"

"I can't carry stuff that far."

Tim shook his head. "That's fine. I can't either. I'm gonna try and borrow a pallet dolly or something. More reasonable?"

Sharp brown eyes met Tim's blue-grey. "Yeah."

They didn't speak again as they finished their food, but Luke did wave slightly before he left, closing the door behind him.

Tim settled back against the wall, exhaling softly. He pulled the disk out from beneath him and spun it on a finger, mind rolling around the statistics on homeless children in Crime Alley.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween!!

Today we get Tim's first foray into his new neighbourhood. This boy has no idea what he's doing. It'll be fine.

Thanks as always to ReplacementRobin for letting me rant and you and all the encouragement.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There weren't any windows in the main room of Tim's apartment, which was an unexpected point in its favour for security, but it also meant Tim had very little indication of time passing. Thankfully, he had set an alarm for exactly that reason.

In the hours between Luke leaving and his alarm going off at 8:00, Tim resisted the urge to digitally stalk the boy, and instead looked into the birth records for the low income neighbourhoods across the city in the last seventeen years. Annoyingly, he could tell a lot of the digital records were lacking or incomplete so he would probably need to do some footwork at registrars offices to establish a full list.

He also compared them with filed missing reports and death certificates.

That slimmed the number down a distressing amount.

There really wasn't any good infrastructure or programs to keep track of Gotham's scattered youth. Neon Knights had been meant to help with that, but here over a decade before it's inception there weren't even accurate population records.

Tim had to bite down a snarl at the disparity between projected population growth (and the resulting municipal budgeting), and the reality of Gotham's streets. Money went into corporate agreements with the city council, often corporations who had a partner *on* the council. Of course there were people profiting from the bullshit data. It felt like all his work to make things better had meant nothing.

Because here and now, it did. He had to start over, with none of the resources or allies.

There were currently approximately seventeen *thousand* homeless and unsheltered kids across Gotham. Without some kind of targeted system, there was no way he could really help a decent fraction of that. The homeless shelters reported an additional thirty-eight thousand staying under their "care."

He had about four months before winter started to set in. That would

have to be his timeline for getting some kind of provisional set up. Maybe a series of marked shelters with regularly stocked supplies inside. If he could draw on the kind of spirit that rebuilt Gotham after the Quake he might even be able to make it self-sustaining…

A nifty side project, and a chance to make meaningful *change*.

The confrontation with Two Face however was sooner than that so he should probably refocus.

The internet had a lot less to offer these days, but it wasn't useless. Tim was able to gain access to the city's admittedly garbage CCTV system and started poking around.

Apparently Cobblepot was an idiot who didn't take down the camera in the alley behind the Iceberg Lounge. It hadn't been there when Tim was Robin, so he had to wonder how much use B got out of it before Cobblepot finally caught on. Tim set up a zip file to store recordings from that camera, since he was inevitably going to have to blackmail the Penguin for something.

After about forty minutes of flipping through cameras and starting recordings at key sites, Tim admitted defeat. There really wasn't much that would tell him about Two Faces movements. He couldn't even check shipping records since those were still just paper copies in the harbour master's office.

Someone really needed to go through the city records with a scanner.

At the thought, his tablet started up with the obnoxiously upbeat jingle Dick changed his alarms to whenever he got his hands on it.

Tim rolled his shoulders and rubbed at his eyes. He really ought to sleep, or at least get some coffee. At some point he had finished the calzone, though he couldn't quite remember doing that. It was fine, he'd pick something up on his way to the docks.

Speaking of, he had better start heading there if he wanted to actually find furniture on top of intel. He would be tempted to put it off, but he had promised Luke. And he didn't really want to sleep on the floor if he could avoid it.

Knees clicking quietly at the movement, Tim stood up and left his tablet on so it could continue working through databases while he was out. He scooped up the jacket and tugged it on. Right he should also pick up some clothes. Oh god his leggings were probably stuck to his

legs at this point, getting out of them was going to *suck*. And the smell in his boots. Changing was going to be an unpleasant experience.

Future Tim problems.

He shuffled the tasks in his head around into some semblance of order, and considered his belts. Would he need them? Maybe not *all* of them, but there were a lot of unknowns and Tim would always rather be over prepared than under. Even if wearing them all layered looked stupid.

He would have been such a good boy scout.

Alas, he'd decided chasing vigilantes through the streets with a camera was a better use of his time.

Carrying basically the entirety of his worldly possessions, Tim locked his apartment behind him and set off in the direction of the docks.

It was early enough a fair number of people were on their way to work, or on their way home after a night out, though Tim let himself be a little judgy about people who were apparently partying on a Monday. Whatever got them through the week, he guessed, but still. Monday.

Only a block and a half from his apartment there was a line-up on the sidewalk leading into… a cafe? The line was moving relatively steadily, but it was more than a little odd for there to be this much attention given to one place. People were walking in and walking right back out, with a pastry and coffee in hand. Very fast service.

Suspiciously fast?

No, not everything was illegal, sometimes there were just great local cafes that made themselves into a staple of their community. Even in Gotham.

He'd keep an eye on it anyways.

The rest of the trip down was relatively peaceful, with an average amount of traffic-based yelling, and Tim stopping at a chain coffee shop for a drink and a muffin. Sketchy giant corporations may be, but at least he knew Starbucks almost definitely didn't have a meth lab in the basement. He kinda hated that he had to have the qualifiers.

He passed more than a couple of thrift stores where he could probably

grab clothes, but lugging them around all day sounded awful so he'd put that one off until later. His to-do list was getting worryingly long, but he'd manage.

The docks themselves were bustling, cargo being loaded and unloaded, instructions and confirmation barked back and forth, and that both made things easier and more difficult. Easy to walk around unnoticed, but odds weren't great that anywhere was empty enough he could just sneak in. Unless…

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Tim was going to be smelling of the bay for weeks.

But hey, score one for creativity and water-proof belts. As always, the actual construction of the docks was shoddy and the office buildings were built on top of the dock, so all Tim had to do was go under and then deconstruct his way in.

The office wasn't exactly empty, but one guy engrossed in trying to get Windows XP to run wasn't going to see anything Tim didn't want him to see. He clearly had enough problems as it was, Tim would spare him the stress of one more. It's not like he was *stealing* anything anyways.

Tim had come up well behind the man on the computer, and there were filing cabinets to his right where, hopefully, the deliveries for the last week were left on top to be filed away by Wednesday. That was the harbour master's schedule eight years from now, at least. There was a concern that the man could be more on top of his filing in his younger age, but Tim was banking on the rule about old dogs and new tricks.

Very carefully angling himself so he didn't drip on the floor, Tim crept to the corner. The filing cabinet was old even now, so it was with very precise hands he lifted the folder off the top. This thing was notorious for creaking when it was so much as looked at when Tim had to steal from it as Robin.

There had been a delivery of lumber and construction materials under one 'Darren Hartly' that had left the docks but whoever picked it up never checked in. The inventory and make of the ship from the delivery itself also seemed to suggest the vessel was either transporting well below capacity, or there was some other cargo not listed. That wasn't suspicious at-

“For fuck’s sake! Fuck it, fuck this damned box, and fuck Bill fucking Gates! I’ll keep fucking paper records, arthritis be damned, if it means I can throw this piece of shit in the fucking water.”

Whoops, apparently Tim’s time was very suddenly up because the harbour master threw his mouse across the room and was standing up.

Well it’s not like he had anything to lose at this point, he’d already got what he came for.

Tim slipped the folder back on the cabinet, roughly how he’d found it, and turned to face the harbour master, carefully blocking his view of the hole in the floor. What was his name again? Harold something?

“Sorry to interrupt, but I know a thing or two about computers. Any chance I could help you out?” Tim sidled forward, letting his shoulders pull together and his head tilt sheepishly. *Just your friendly, local, soaking-wet IT guy. Nothing sketchy here.*

“Who the fuck are you and how did you get in here?” snapped Harold… Diaz? “And why the fuck are you wet?”

Hook.

Awkward laugh, hand to the back of the neck, *not a threat, not a threat.* “I fell off the dock on the way over here? I managed to get out of the water before anyone noticed, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread it around since I know some of the guys. I’m looking for work, and someone mentioned you were trying to digitize your record keeping?”

“What are you suggesting?” Diaz ran an assessing eye over his drowned-rat appearance. He clearly didn’t trust him, even if he no longer looked a step away from attacking him. Or calling the cops.

Line.

“I can set up your computer to filter docking requests so you only have to see requested changes to the schedule and to automatically add anything you approve. I can also set up your email so you don’t have to sort through junk mail to find relevant documents.” Wait, too formal, Harold was tensing up again. A deliberate stumble over words, let the accent slip and throw in a swear. “In r-, I mean if you want legal shit I can sign an NDA and spend a day or two getting the rest of your records entered into your system.” Tim gave him the troublemaker-with-a-heart-of-gold grin he picked up from Dick, despite the Tim WayneTM trying to surface at the scent of a business

transaction.

Suspicion warred with the inherent Gotham desire to not have wasted money. Come on, inner-Scrooge.

“How much do you want for this, and what am I supposed to do if it breaks?” he finally snarled, still on the offensive.

Sinker.

Tim didn’t let the triumph into his smile. Equalize, let him negotiate to save his pride, despite it already being over. “Market price for a tech consultant is about forty an hour, and based on what you’ve got I can do the initial set-up in about two, but the data entry will take longer. Is that cabinet all you’ve got?” He received a nod. “Cool, I can probably get that entered in three. I can also come back once a week to confirm nothing’s fucked up, no charge unless I need to do something?”

“Forty an hour? Fuck off. What’s to stop you making sure something is fucked up every week?” That was a very good question, for someone who actually wanted to make money off of tech support. For a guy just trying to get an in for regular access to intel, not so much.

“There are a lot of businesses and services in Gotham that are still paper-based because no one can be bothered to put all those hard-copies into software. I’m looking to exploit that opening in as many places as I can. If what I build for you doesn’t work, tell people. In fact, I’ll take thirty-five per hour of work for you if you *do* tell people when it turns out my system doesn’t suck.”

Some probably misguided math went on behind Diaz’s eyes. People in the future barely valued tech consultants time, there was no way someone at this point would want to pay what the labour was actually worth. Especially not someone who considered ‘work’ mostly in the context of dockwork. Still, Tim owed it to all the real tech consultants out there to not set too low a bar, even if he wasn’t really relying on this for an income.

“Make it twenty-five and get it done by Wednesday,” shot back Diaz.

“I can build the program today and come do the records tomorrow, but it’s thirty or you can keep bitching about the arthritis until one of the bosses everyone knows do business here takes both your hands to shut you up,’ Tim said, letting himself reflect back the shrewd spite.

He got an eyebrow for that, and what he was pretty sure was a flash of respect. Maybe there was something to Jason's incessantly nasty attitude. "Fine, but if this thing don't work you won't be touching another computer in this city, you hear me?"

This was better than his best-case scenario heading out this morning. Tim would have the dock schedules first and without having to do any kind of regular espionage. Nothing was going to be going in or out of this harbour legally without him knowing. For his next trick, he'd just need to set up a system to monitor all the undeclared goods.

Tim glanced at the cheap clock on the wall. "It's officially 9:03, I'll start now and if you're not still here when I leave, I'll leave a note on your desk with the time I left. We can do the details of payment tomorrow before I start the data entry."

If he was done by eleven, he'd have plenty of time to find furniture, and procure some means of its transport before meeting up with Luke. Worse comes to worst, he may end up borrowing a car from an unsuspecting citizen, which wouldn't set a great example, but it would make his life easier.

Decisions, decisions.

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Windows XP was a motherfucker.

After ninety minutes of wrestling it into submission, almost immediately going straight to the OS to build from scratch rather than mess around with the unresponsive and imprecise applications, he had a program that was explicit and intuitive enough even Diaz should have little problem using it.

Tim kind of wondered if it had always been this annoying and clunky, or if he'd just been spoiled by Babs' custom systems and his own extensive shortcuts.

Probably the latter, but still.

Now, should he stay and pretend to work for the next half hour to fill the time slot he claimed he would need, or should he get started on that furniture hunting? Tim had a theory or two about where exactly Maggie had been referring to, but he couldn't recall any particular place that was a dumping site for old furniture.

To hell with it, Tim needed a nap before meeting up with Luke anyways. He'd find the stuff and head home to get at least a couple hours of rest before extensive manual labour.

Diaz was outside, yelling at people about… something, so Tim scribbled the time on a post-it, and stuck it to the monitor. His knees were not impressed with being still so long, complaining loudly when he stood up, but he pushed through the ache to walk.

Something nagged at him as he approached the door.

Oh, right. The hole in the floor. Best to fix that now and pretend it never happened. It hadn't seem like Diaz had noticed, which didn't exactly speak well of him. Tim didn't have a hammer, so he just used his collapsed bo to knock the nails into place, trying to be as quiet as possible. On the upside, he wasn't likely to need to do this again since he had a wonderful opportunity to regularly check in. And because he had set up a very discreet link to his own system that would let him monitor the schedule whenever he wanted.

This time when he stood up, Tim's vision grayed for a moment, and he had to lock his knees to keep from swaying. That narrowed his timeline somewhat.

Tim exited onto the docks, mostly dry now, and headed for his first point of interest. There was a series of dumpsters at one end where the dock's waste was dumped and it was possible people also ditched furniture.

As he approached, he could see wood and fabric, piled up next to the dumpsters where they wouldn't fit. Calling it furniture was giving it more credit than it was due, but there was enough workable pieces to outfit at least his old apartment, if he threw any kind of interior decorating to the wind. All that stuff was to uphold an image and had come with the place anyways. Now he just needed functional.

Given his recent streak of luck, Tim decided not to tempt fate on things still being here when he came back later, so he took a few minutes to play furniture jenga and stash his chosen pieces of bed frame, table, and chairs out of sight behind a warehouse door a dozen feet away. His arms burned by the time he was finished.

Running on empty, and he knew it. Tick tock.

Still needed to find a dolly or something, because there was no way he and a kid were going to be able to get this across the city by

themselves if they had to carry it. Hell, he'd take a wagon if it came down to it.

A spiral search pattern using the dumpsters as a starting point probably wasn't the most efficient system Tim could have used, but if he had to go over every wharf in a grid he was going to scream, so spiral it was. He passed enough fallen needles to suggest one of the warehouses was not only housing drugs, but probably home to users. Something to check out later, but not helpful at the moment. Idly, as he moved farther from the water and into the semi-industrial area proper, he tried to peg which gang or mob owned which warehouse. The ratio of criminal holdings to civilian was kind of worrying.

Ah, there was his own little warehouse, door left shut. Tim wondered if it counted as a criminal holding, since he didn't even have a deed to it or anything. He recalled a stack of pallets in one corner, maybe however they got there was still inside as well? Worth a shot.

Tim bypassed his own traps with relative ease, and it looked like none of them had been disturbed, which was a great sign. He might need to check-in regularly to maintain it his tenuous possession of it, unless he could find a way to buy it off its actual owners, if there even were any. There was a chance he was putting too much thought into a place he had spent maybe two hours in, and had no current use for.

If it had a pallet dolly, he'd call it fate and keep the place.

He made his way to the stack he remembered in the corner, and sure enough, they were still sitting on the beautiful wheeled contraption that had brought them in.

Alright, warehouse, welcome to the family.

Tim really needed to get some sleep.

Pallet by pallet, he freed the dolly and took hold of its handle to stash it with the furniture. He was so close to being able to call it a day out here and head home. Maybe grab something to eat on his way back. *Nap.* And then he'd have a whole afternoon to try and convince Luke to stay somewhere safer than wherever he'd slept last night, if he had gotten any at all.

Mind churning through arguments, Tim wouldn't have noticed the shift behind him if it weren't for the unholy screech of steel against asphalt. He looked back.

One of the wheels popped off.

For fuck's sake. Fuck things being easy, apparently. The wheel hadn't gotten far, so he tossed it on the back of it and carefully wheeled it the rest of the way.

He could figure out if it was fixable later.

God, another later. It felt like his entire world was made up of to-do lists and laters. There was so much he had to do, so much that *needed doing,* if he wasn't careful Tim was pretty sure he could spend the rest of his life squaring things away. He wasn't sure if it would be worth it or not.

He needed to focus.

Tim left the broken dolly next to the broken furniture and closed his eyes, trying to lessen the pounding in his head. He let himself have a count of sixty.

And then he turned away and headed back into the city.

The walk was a daze. His eyes burned, his feet ached, his head pulsed. He could barely focus to retrace his steps.

Barely was enough.

The key slid into the lock, and the breath slid from his chest. The door swung open, and he stumbled through, letting it swing shut behind him. Without any awareness on his part, he found himself on the floor and pressed against it. He could sleep like this, just for a little while.

Wait. Responsibility. Promises.

Clumsy fingers set a timer on his belt to zap him in three hours if he didn't deactivate it. It'd do.

Tim's head dropped to his knees without his permission, and he was out.

Chapter End Notes

> You may be wondering, Table, why did this take longer to get out than the last part? And I would answer, because I wrote half of the last part in one sitting where this one I've been picking away at, few hundred words at a time.

I'm not going to pretend to have schedule, chapters will come out when I finish them. I try to write at least a little everyday, but who knows man.

This part tbh got kind of out of hand? It's very stream of conscious, but I kinda dig that so it stays. As always, thanks to Replacement Robin for being generally great and thanks for all the wonderful comments. I really appreciate it ^-^

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was with a small amount of discomfort, Tim found himself falling face first onto the floor. A mild electric shock would do that. At least he was awake, and still had some time before he needed to go see Luke.

He made a quick run to one of the thrift stores he had passed earlier, picking up a few pairs of jeans, t-shirts, some (packaged) socks and underwear, a pair of cracked-leather boots, and a red zip-up hoodie that caught his eye. Enough to live off of for a while, though he'd consider getting more if he was stuck here for long. There was still the vague hope someone would notice his presence soon.

A glance at the time told Tim grocery shopping would be yet another tomorrow venture, but at least he had time to change.

Getting out of his suit after wearing it for several days straight was exactly as unpleasant as he had expected it to be. It stuck in places things really should not be sticking and it released a smell that made Tim regret having a nose. He took a quick shower with it, scrubbing the major places sweat accumulated with his bar of cheap soap and cleaning himself off. It was the best he could do, so he left the suit hanging from the showerhead on the off chance it would dry sometime this century.

Oh hell he didn't have a towel.

Tim darted to the clothes bag, drying off with the packaged underwear since it was about the only thing he was *sure* was clean, and got dressed. Today was a hoodie day, he decided. His hair was

going to dry into a nightmare, he just knew it. But at least it didn't feel like sadness and sweat.

He still kinda smelled like the harbour.

With personal hygiene sort of checked off, Tim made his way to the convenience store. According to the plastic watches on display, at exactly four o'clock. Reliability was important when trying to establish oneself as a trustworthy adult to kids.

Luke wasn't inside, but Tim had seen him hiding in the alley beside it. Lurking was thirsty work, so Tim bought two bottles of water before heading back out to meet him.

"Ready to go?" Tim asked, tossing a bottle to him.

Luke caught it, and gave Tim a judgy kitten look. He fell into step beside Tim anyways. "You lied about your name."

Sharp kid, but Tim had already had this conversation once. "Yes and no. My middle name is Tim and my first name sucks. So it was a little misleading, but not technically a lie."

"What's your first name?"

Tim laughed. "No way, kid. If you can figure it out yourself, you can use it. Until then, it's just Tim."

"Fine, Weird Guy," Luke's voice was mulish, but there was a light in

his eyes and his steps were easy.

They didn’t speak much on the rest of the walk, Tim only confirming their direction and making sure Luke always had a lane to run while keeping himself casually between Luke and anything that looked threatening. It was a careful balance made harder by not letting him notice it was happening.

Tim was kind of enjoying being the responsible adult one, for once. Damian didn't count, the brat would rather eat his sword than take anything resembling guidance from Tim. Or better yet, make *Tim* eat it.

The dumpsters with the furniture was far enough away that calling them ‘by the docks’ was giving the wrong impression, but at least that meant the walk was shorter this time.

Luke looked at the pile of splintered wood and rotting fabric, with the critique of a construction foreman. "There's some salvageable stuff near the top I can pass down to you that won't fuck up the whole balance here."

He started climbing before Tim could even respond, calling behind him as he scrambled up like some kind of squirrel, "How willing are you to do a little construction work? Most of this is in pieces, but not all of the pieces are going to match up."

"Woah, Luke, slow down! I already pulled some pieces from in there this morning and stashed them. No need to start scaling Mount Bonfire-in-Waiting." Tim wanted to go get him down, but this thing really *was* unstable and he didn't want to risk it collapsing if he didn't have to.

The boy stopped, and looked down. The look was back, with added disdain thanks to the angle from halfway up. "You could have said something earlier."

And then he twisted around, holding onto a protruding desk leg with one hand. With a lurch, Tim realized his plan was to jump, which he normally would let slide, for hypocrisy reasons, but he could see this wouldn't work. The bookcase beneath Luke's foot was an insufficient launch point, and it would ruin any chance of a clean landing.

Luke clearly hadn’t noticed.

"Wait-!"

Luke was already moving, the cheap plywood-framed cardboard giving way under the force of his push and sending him pitching face first towards a mess of sharp edges.

It was old instincts, some of the first from before he ever put on a cape, that had him darting fleet-footed up and over and past the fragments of furniture and on top of a reeking ice chest to catch the boy before he could go headfirst into the razor splinters. Tim tucked him close to his chest and nimbly hopped down, as half the pile shifted and rattled, things falling into each other with creaks and groans.

Head pressed against Tim’s shoulder, Luke was tight like he was bracing for a blow. Or a fall. He was ever so gently shaking, and barely breathing. He looked up slightly, first at the pile and then at Tim, pupils blown.

Then he took a deep breath and set his feet back down, shoving away from Tim none too gently. "Thanks."

Tim kept a hand on his shoulder, but didn't try to force eye contact. "C'mon, I"ll show you where I stashed the stuff I grabbed."

Together they made their way to the still-ajar door. Tim didn't let the silence linger. "I managed to find something with wheels, but one of them is broken. I don't suppose you know anything about cart repair? It's okay if you don't, we'll just have to take it a little slower."

That seemed to rouse Luke a little more, and he approached the dolly with purpose, taking a knee to examine the axle and then the wheel perched next to it. He hummed a little under his breath as he fitted it into place, carefully aligning the edges, before pulling back and kicking it hard.

"That should keep it there long enough for us to get back, as long as we're careful about it."

Tim nodded. "Thanks. Now do you want to give me a hand getting all of these bits on top of there?"

They loaded the dolly, Luke occasionally taking a shot at Tim's choices, which Tim thought was a little unfair. What did Luke know about interior design anyways?

“Two chairs, a table, and a bed. What are you trying the minimalist lifestyle here?”

A raised eyebrow. “You’ve got me, oh paragon of apartment planning, what else do I need?”

Luke gave him a flat look. “You need more chairs, somewhere comfy to sit, and at least one shelf to put shit on. And, y’know. A mattress. Unless you *like* sleeping on slats. Then again, maybe you do.” The unspoken *you goddamn weirdo* was very loud.

“The shelf and chairs we could grab, but comfy implies stuffing that has probably rotted out here, and I’m pretty sure any mattress in there would give me so many diseases,” Tim said, making eye contact to convey the depth of his concern. “So many.”

“Wimp,” Luke snorted.

“Maybe, but at least I won’t get syphilis without any of the fun parts.” He paused. “That’s a joke, but STIs are not. Seriously, no one wants to be leaking pus from their dick or... other orifices. Safe sex is worth the inconvenience.”

“You’re gross and I’m not listening to more of this. There’s a place I know where you can get a mattress, if you can get over yourself enough to ignore the weird stains. I’ll talk to some people about a chair.” Luke seemed to be half thinking aloud, staring at the dolly in contemplation.

Tim risked placing a hand on his shoulder. “I appreciate it, but don’t waste any favours on me. I can figure something out eventually. I’ll take you up on the suspicious mattress, regardless.”

Luke looked back at him over his shoulder, gaze searching. After a moment he nodded and pulled away. “C’mon I already know which piece of shit shelf we can grab.”

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With the cart loaded up, shelf included, they left the docks, this time with Luke in the lead since his response to Tim saying the mattress could wait was, in a word, vehement. In another, it was kind of mean.

The place turned out to be a stack of mattresses behind a strip mall, tucked under and awning and on a pallet so presumably they wouldn't rot quite as fast. Each mattress was a varying level of unpleasant, so Tim just picked the one that made him the least uncomfortable to look at and promised himself he would sleep on top of his cape until he got sheets.

In the trek back, they actually attained a level of small talk, even if it was just comparing preferred places to eat and why. Tim had to watch his words to make sure he never referenced somewhere that didn't exist yet, but he learned a thing or two about current conflicts over culinary sites. Luke also had a recommendation of where specifically they should get their pizza for the evening.

They stopped at the place in question, a little family owned pizzeria that did take-away for an extra dollar. There was a little stink-eye over Tim parking the cart out front, but after he gave the woman by the clay oven an apologetic grin and a shrug, she seemed to let it go with a huff.

As they waited for their order to finish, two men in cheap suits strode in. Noisy, big, low level enforcers that thought they were hot shit because they got to collect debts even though they were never sent after anyone who might consider fighting back. Here on their time off, or was there more to this place than Luke had mentioned?

"Knock, knock, knock, Mama Vecellio. You're running late on this month's payment. Without proper funding, how can we be expected to keep this fine establishment safe from miscreants and freaks of the night?" the smaller man drawled with arms crossed, loose and

confident.

At the till, a teenager's face hardened, but she stepped back as the other woman (her grandmother?) stepped forward. "Bullshit. We paid for the next two months last Tuesday."

The smaller man looked to his buddy, still more amused than angry. For now, at least. "Well I'm sure you understand the way this city is going, more and more desperate people. Who knows what kind of terrible things could happen to this place, if you didn't have us looking after you?"

Luke was very carefully not looking at the men, and neither was the teenager, but both were wired tight and clearly anxious.

"We have paid. We will pay again in two months, no sooner," snapped the eldest Vecellio. She gripped the spatula like she was ready to fight with it.

Big guy apparently he decided he was bored with negotiations, or maybe he thought he could help speed things along. Either way, he picked up one of the chairs and swung it at the nearest wall.

For the second time that day, Tim moved without thought. He was over in a moment, grabbing the leg of the chair and twisting with it to use its momentum to spin them around and placing himself between the two men. "Hasn't your mom ever told you it's not nice to break other people's stuff?"

"Didn't your mommy ever tell you not to get involved in other people's business?" sneered the smaller man, though still several inches taller than Tim, reaching into his coat. The big one tried to jerk the chair away, but Tim had a solid grip on it now and wasn't letting

go until things escalated further.

“What can I say, I’ve never been good at taking advice from parental figures.” Tim smiled with everything but his eyes. “You should consider it though. No need to make a mess when you’re the ones being unreasonable in the first place. They’ve paid more than enough for your poor excuse for ‘protection.’”

“Fuck off, kid. Last warning before we redecorate with your *face,* ” the man Tim decided to call Chatterbox growled. As if he sounded like anything more threatening than a garburator.

Tim glanced around, taking in the staff (another teenager had emerged from the back, along with a possible parent), the patrons (two people besides Luke; a young couple out on a date), and the breakable objects in a ten-foot radius (chairs, tables, glasses, a window). Ideally, he wouldn’t have to fight them here, but he wasn’t optimistic about their manners.

“How about this.” It wasn’t a suggestion. “We go outside and have a *conversation* about the respective things our mothers did or did not teach us, and then we go from there?”

Luke was staring at Tim now, his entire expression one of *what the fuck are you doing* . Tim didn’t break eye contact with the thug, but he did give a very discreet thumbs up. Hopefully the kid wouldn’t worry too much.

He would make it quick.

Both men laughed at him. Jerks. “Okay, brat, if you’re so eager to get taught a lesson, sure. Ladies, take notes. Cooperate or you’ll end up like this moron.”

Tim tugged the chair towards the floor, and the big man resisted for a second before releasing, probably trying to throw Tim off-balance. Too bad for him, Tim's balance was honed on giant pennies and moving trains. After gently lowering the furniture to the tile, Tim turned on his heel and made for the door, watching the mens' reflections in the window in case they tried anything, though he doubted they would. They were so overconfident they didn't think they needed the advantage.

For all the lies Tim was telling these days, he needed a good, honest, fight.

The door opened onto the darkening street, and Tim waited. Weight a little forward, hands loosely curled, eyes sharp.

Yet again Chatterbox opened his mouth, doubtlessly with some cliche bullshit, but Tim had had enough. The point in these kinds of situations was pretty specifically *not* to talk. Maybe it would be a teaching moment after all.

Tim whipped a heel into his open jaw, quietly missing the titanium soles of his work boots. Steel toes just didn't have the same versatility. Ah, well. Beggars and choosing and all that.

He followed the motion of the kick across his body to drive an elbow into a conveniently lowered temple, and as his foot touched pavement, he used it as a pivot point to torque his opposite fist into Chatterbox's chin in a neat *lights out* . All that bark, and not even a flash of teeth.

Shame.

Big guy was staring wide-eyed, but he at least had his hands up so he must know *something* about fighting. He tried to grab for Tim's neck, and while Tim bit back the laugh he didn't try to hide the grin as he weaved through the outstretched arms to drive his knuckles into his windpipe, a palm to his nose, and then hooked his arm around the side of his neck and drove the man's head into his knee. Twice. The elbow to the base of the skull was more an afterthought than anything else; his own little way of double-tapping.

Shaking his hands out in a quick flick (fighting without proper wraps was hell on the wrists), Tim glanced through the window to see the pizzeria's occupants staring at him. He tried to soften the admittedly manic edge to his smile, but he wasn't sure he was entirely successful, judging by their incredulous expressions.

The quiet chime of the door broke the spell, and when Tim stepped inside he was greeted by a surprisingly coordinated, "What the fuck?"

"Any chance you have some rope or something so I can send a bit of a message?" Tim made sure to direct his question at the potential grandmother. "For some reason, I can't imagine calling the cops would help anybody here."

Flinty eyes met his for a moment, then turned to the first teenager. "Stella, go get the ties the vegetables arrive in."

It was a very awkward silence between the girl, Stella, entering the back and returning with a few coils of a braided polyester. Tim took them with an absent thank you, already shuffling through options. Individually these weren't much good, but he could braid them together quickly enough. At least the streetlights on this street were relatively stable. Neither of the idiots outside should be getting up soon, so it was fine.

Hands working, he asked, “What’re we looking at for time on that pizza? And Luke, would you mind eating the first few slices here if it takes me an extra couple of minutes to sort this out?”

“I don’t mind. But you’re still paying,” Luke said. His tone still contained a fair amount of bemusement, but at least it didn’t seem to be slowing him down.

Tim waved a hand, as he finished the much more load-bearing rope. “Of course I am, I promised, didn’t I? Okay. I’m gonna go hang those assholes up to dry, and if the pizza’s done before I am feel free to get started.” He slipped the money he’d brought for his out of his hoodie pocket, handed it to Stella, and made his way back outside, ideas coming together.

--

It was only the work of about ten minutes to give the pair of them wedgies they would *never* forget, counterbalanced off one another to make getting down an exercise in teamwork. Maybe they’d learn something about the value of friendship and not underestimating opponents.

Tim wouldn’t hold his breath.

When he re-entered the pizzeria, conversation came to a halt. Looked like everyone had gravitated together and were splitting both the meat lover’s Luke had ordered, and a second one with vegetables. The couple had added their half finished breadstick basket. Posture was casual all around, but had frozen in place when the bell rang. Tim got the impression his ears ought to be burning.

“With any luck they’ll think twice before coming back here to extort

you again. I don't suppose you know who they work for, do you?" Tim figured the odds were decent on them knowing, since people weren't exactly going to give large amounts of money to a couple of random guys no matter how intimidating.

Surprisingly, the answer came from Luke, perched on a table. "The whole street pays the Ibanescus to be left alone."

"Everyone on this entire street is paying a glorified dog-fighting ring for protection? Protection from what, rabies?"

The whole room gave him variations on the same confused look. Was this not common knowledge? One half of the couple spoke up. "What are you talking about, they do more than just dogfights."

Tim resisted the urge to roll his eyes by focusing on how backwards this felt. "Yeah, human trafficking and prostitution. And apparently protection rackets." He glanced from face to face, at least they were more skeptical than disbelieving. "Look, this is ridiculous. Tell your neighbours not to waste time paying those losers anymore and I'll sort it out. They won't be bothering anyone much longer."

"Is that a promise?" the oldest Vecellio asked, her flinty gaze holding something like a test.

There was only one answer he could give. "Yes. I promise." The tension was distinctly unpleasant, so it was time for a little Robin levity. "Now, did you save any of that pizza? I want both to eat tonight and get all that furniture in my place, you know, before midnight."

Luke hopped to the floor and closed the lid on the mostly-eaten pizza. "Thanks for the food, Mrs. Vecellio. I'll carry the pizza, and you can

drag the cart, Weird Guy."

"You just don't want to do any hard labour,"Tim gave an over-the-top put-out sigh. "Youth these days. Where did we go wrong?"

The grin he got in response was worth having to drag the cart himself the last four blocks. Luke was magnanimous enough to help get the pieces upstairs, and then threw the pizza box at his head and told him to get some sleep.

Rude.

But he had a point, Tim *was* exhausted. Apparently his nap had done less to replenish his energy than he had hoped. Even setting up his furniture felt like too much effort at this point. He also didn't want anyone in the adjacent apartments getting woken up my furniture construction.

Tim quickly scarfed down a couple pieces of pizza, and brushed his teeth for what he realized was the first time in *days* . Then he shifted the mattress until it was laid flat on the floor, carefully set his cape overt op of it, and called it a night. He could chase down leads on the Ibanescus and Two Face tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

> Two things in two days? Thanks reading week, for helping me be productive in all the wrong ways!
>
> For real though, do my endings seem rushed to you guys? I'm trying not to drag everything out unnecessarily but I'm not sure it's coming across well. Hopefully finally arriving at timeskips will make my pacing less painfully weird. We can all hope.
>
> Thanks for the lovely comments and such, they do genuinely brighten my day. Hope you're all having a good week, regardless of the seemingly ubiquitous crap weather.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the next week, Tim laid a lot of groundwork; scouting the area and eavesdropping on conversations, showing up at a handful of other small industrial companies to offer tech support. He bought a burner phone so he had a number to give out, and scrounged up some physical documentation to match the digital copies he'd fabricated on his first night. He finally sorted out his utilities.

He also managed to find the warehouse where Two Face was storing his construction supplies for the big event in the next few days. It was all sitting there, behind lazy armed guards and cheap locks, just *asking* to be messed with. Tim had obliged.

Three times in the seven days Luke came over for dinner. The first time was actually the next day because he insisted "You won't build anything without help," and then demanded compensation. They argued over Chinese takeout about whether spring rolls were superior to green onion cake. They absolutely were not, no matter what Luke seemed to think.

The second time, Luke wasn't alone. He brought with him a couple of little girls, offering no explanation, and telling them they could stay right by the door if they wanted. Which was a little presumptuous, but Tim wasn't going to argue. The older one, who couldn't have been older than six, introduced them as Rita and Miri when Luke passed them a couple boxes of pad thai. There was a brief attempt by the younger girl to steal one of his socks, that he averted by pinning it to the door frame with a chopstick when she turned and exposed the toe on their way out.

It was the principle of the thing.

On the third night, he had company again, this time an older-looking boy. It was hard to peg an actual age, since chronic malnutrition messed with size, but Tim would hazard he was somewhere around thirteen. The boy didn't say a word all night, and stood in the doorway until he was finished eating. Then he left without making eye contact.

Apparently this was Tim's life now.

He also picked out a handful of locations the Ibanescus had used for dogfights in his own time and were definitely still active today. Or was it already active? English grammar was not meant for this kind of temporal explanation. Either way, that was tonight's project.

With all the care of an uncertified combat engineer, Tim set up explosives (obtained by visiting the cleaning supplies aisle, raiding dumpsters for scrap electronics, and getting a little creative) at each site and linked them via cannibalized radios to a detonator. The sites were empty when not in use, and Tim had personally recommended various squatters, who were just a little too close to the blast radius, spend the night in other places on account of "some cape and mask bullshit." He'd also sealed them as best he could, just to be sure. Now he just needed to find this evening's activities, unwire that bomb, and tip the cops off, since he wasn't *actually* trying to get anyone hurt. Much.

It was a shame about the dogs, since so rarely could fighting dogs be rehabilitated. The poor things deserved better than being put down for things they didn't even want to do in the first place. Maybe he could-

No. Firm no. Not only was he unsure his apartment's policy on pets, but he was in no position to care for a dog with the severity of issues inevitable from the abuse involved in a fighting ring. It wouldn't be fair to the animal.

Thankfully, if there was one thing illegal gambling rings were not, it was difficult to track down. At first, Tim had thought they would be, but, given the whole point was to attract people to take part, there were always tells. This time, it was the rather indiscreet trail of fresh paw-print graffiti. Keeping it classy, these guys were. They had set up shop in an abandoned car manufacturers, making a maze of chainlink between the audience and the fight, with armed men on the upper walkways around the makeshift ring.

The air was already abuzz with the manic bloodlust that came only from people who were perfectly safe and hoping for carnage. He'd call them vultures, but that would be an insult to scavengers everywhere. At least vultures ate what they found.

Much to his disgust, Tim, with work boots and both the jacket and hoodie to mask the layered belts, fit right in.

The master of ceremonies for the night was riling the crowd up even further, and the cops would be about ten minutes out from the time of his call, which gave Tim a clear, if narrow window to get far away. He didn't want to set anything off until after the cops were already engaged at this location to slow response times to the other sites. After all, wherever Dragos Ibanescu was tonight, the destruction of all of his primary holdings would get him moving, and Tim wanted first crack at him.

Tim made his way through the crowd, picking weapons out of pockets wherever he could, hoping to minimize the violence when the police arrived. The number of knives people had managed to get inside was a little concerning, but it just cemented Tim's opinion of the Ibanescus' competence. This could be fun.

Getting into the health-code violation of a bathroom where he had stashed the explosives was less a matter of sneaking than waiting in

line for the single bathroom. He had left it at the bottom of the trash bag in the corner, so he did his best not to touch any truly unmentionable substances as he rummaged and regretted his life choices.

Bingo.

Careful not to slosh the liquids inside too much, Tim raised his amateur demolitions device from the bag and set it onto the floor. Since he had built these specifically as a part of this plan, it was relatively easy to dismantle, starting with the transmitter and going step by step until he had a wad of electrical tape and tinfoil, some busted electronics, and a couple bottles of cleaning supplies.

"Hurry it up in there!" someone yelled, banging on the door.

Tim responded with a string of curses that would have made Jason proud, and picked up his pace.

He left the bottles in the corner, in case someone was struck by sudden inspiration to make this bathroom a little less horrible, and shoved the rest of it back into the garbage bag. Then it was out the door, flipping off the man who had 'knocked' as he went.

All he needed now was a secluded place to call the cops from.

The first fight was underway, and Tim tried to ignore the snarling and pained whines, and sounds of tearing flesh, but he had to wrap his hands tight around the knives in his pockets to keep from lashing out. These people weren't quite monsters, but they were so desperate to get away from their own shitty lives they would not only condone, but *actively seek out* this kind of pointless brutality.

There was no real thought that guided him past the fences and to the back of the factory, beyond needing to get away from the cheering, but his feet carried him through shadows and around corners until he found himself looking at the cages. Two men armed with cattle prods paced back and forth on the strip between the two walls of bloody and rusted steel. None of the dogs even snapped at them as they walked, instead watching with wary gazes that were all too aware of the pain those sparking sticks were capable of.

Fuck it. He needed an out of the way place anyways, and it's not like the dogs would give a damn about a phone call.

Tim glanced up, to the rafters, and decided they could hold his weight as long as he thought very light thoughts and didn't strain them too hard. Which meant no grapple. He took a running start at the wall, retracted bo in hand, and made it three long strides up before putting his staff to the wall and extending it, using the shift in momentum to launch himself to the wooden struts. It was a close thing, hands closing around wood with enough splinters to make Tim wish he was wearing gloves, but then he was up and creeping towards the two men just as they crossed paths.

Perfect, if he could drop the first silently, his partner wouldn't know until nine paces later, when he turned around.

Missing the admittedly kind of dramatic flare of his cape, Tim dropped back down. Very conscious of his time frame, he darted forward to target number one. Arm around the throat, tight enough to stop any kind of shout, and the free hand to catch the cattle prod in the middle. Twist it sharply, pressing his other arm closer still, until the end of it was centimeters from the base of the man's spine. Then release one and with the other, *push* .

The man went rigid, shook, and made to drop but Tim stepped into

catch him. Wouldn't do to let him hit the ground loudly and-

Pain crackled across Tim's body, coming from his left side and whiting out his thoughts, and he collapsed at the feet of the other man, who had, apparently, turned around earlier than expected.

“Well lookie here, what’s a kid like you doing in a place like this?” his grin was slimy and sharp, and as soon as Tim got the twitching under control he was going to *demolish* him. “Causing trouble, eh? The boss’s always happy to get new merchandise, and you’ll fetch a pretty penny with a face like that.”

He reached down, fingers just grazing Tim’s jaw, and *nope. That was enough.* Tim snapped his head forward and sank his teeth into the meat of the man’s hand. The shriek was satisfying, but not as much as the *thunk* he made when Tim swept his legs from under him. It was a close thing, not getting crushed by his falling weight, but Tim rolled out of the way and jabbed an elbow into his throat, once, twice, and then grabbed him by the chin to slam his head into the concrete.

A groan told Tim he wasn’t quite done yet, and man what was this guy’s skull made of? Fine, Tim threw a leg over him, and introduced him to his fist. They had a few words, until, at long last, Tim’s fist won the argument and the man agreed to pass out. Diplomacy at its finest.

Rolling his shoulders and neck out, Tim looked up and straight into the biggest pair of golden eyes he had ever seen.

Oh *no* .

It was a tiny little pit bull, emaciated and unscarred. They hadn’t even bothered to cut its tail, which told Tim more than anything that it was

here to die. Something small to die messy and whet the appetite.

For a searing second, Tim hated these men.

And then he breathed out, slowly stretching his fingertips to the bars of the cage, and let the pup scent him. “Hello, beautiful. I’m not here to hurt you, though I know that may be hard to believe.”

It took a moment, Tim muttering soft nonsense all the while, but eventually the dog crept forward and tried to lick at him through the bars.

Tim’s heart melted.

He pulled the picks from his belt and carefully unlocked the cage, swinging it open and then stepping out of the way. The roar of cheers reached a crescendo; he didn’t have a lot of time.

Phone out, dialing quickly, Tim retreated back to a corner out of view of both entrances to the room. The conversation was terse, toned low and forced to phrase the ‘tip’ urgently enough they’d respond immediately, but not so specific he seemed involved. About halfway through the call, Tim felt a nudging at his legs. He looked down and was met with a tongue lolling out of a toothy grin.

So he was doing this.

Tim reached down, slowly, letting the dog see his movements coming, and when it nudged its head into his hand, he gently picked it- quick check, a her- up and held her to his chest. She licked at the underside of his chin, even as she shook slightly. Tim one-handedly wrangled the

ends of his hoodie together, and zipped it up over her, tucking the hem into his pants and creating a makeshift sling to hold her in place. Her head peeked out the top for a moment, before she ducked down and gently headbutted him.

It was a little awkward, but he wouldn't pretend the warmth wasn't welcome.

Still, it was time to get out of here before the cops arrived.

--

Sirens tore through the night, making the dog quiver, and putting an extra kick in Tim's step. He would have hit the rooftops, but he was pretty sure that would actually give his passenger a heart attack, so he was sticking to the sidewalk until the last minute.

After two blocks, Tim zipped his jacket as well, and thumbed the radio in his pocket, emitting a signal on his carefully chosen bandwidth.

The explosions weren't big, were actually carefully designed to make each site unusable with minimal collateral, but the number of them happening at the same time meant damn near every block in Lower Gotham would hear at least one.

And the timer was going.

Ducking into an alley, Tim pulled out his grapple and headed for Park Row at pace. Odds weren't high he would find Ibanescu there, but it was central enough a vehicle moving in a hurry towards the heart of the city would pass by or near it. If he had to guess, Tim would say

that Dragos would most likely assume this was some kind of rival gang trying to move into his territory. That was certainly what it looked like, after all, and the best response would be to head to one of the illicit meeting sites for mid-level crime bosses to raise a little hell.

It was a shame those were rarely stable, or Tim probably could have predicted just where Dragos would be going and could head him off on the way there. Then again, the Ibanescus fancied themselves about mere street gangs, and were less likely to go to some meetup by the tracks. He just hoped it wasn't a bar, because he really didn't need his clothes smelling like booze, and he hadn't bothered to make a physical ID yet.

Knowing his luck, it was probably a bar.

As if summoned by the thought, the screech of tires that could only come from a luxury vehicle taking a corner too hard sounded a couple of streets over.

Tuning out the wriggling against him, Tim swung around the corner and over a small apartment complex in time to watch the tail of the vehicle disappear ahead of him, heading south.

South, south... there was a couple of underworld bars just before the Narrows, and an Italian restaurant owned by the Falcones that a handful of other families ate at. Tim had been there once, running an undercover op for Huntress, and even he could admit their handmade pasta was *phenomenal* . Too bad their store room was full of cocaine.

Tim wouldn't pretend to know the particulars of Dragos' thought processes, but he probably wasn't dumb enough to pick a fight somewhere that was putting up the airs of legitimacy. No one liked their money laundering businesses getting shot up. Which meant Tim's early hunch that it was a bar was probably right. He didn't think The

Stacked Deck opened until next year, but he was pretty sure My Alibi was operational.

He'd aim for there, and adjust if the blatantly speeding car seemed to go somewhere else.

Quiet whimpers and the scratch of little claws kept Tim company for the journey, and it was an effort not to think too hard about all the work that would need to go into finding the little darling a home, but it was really not the time.

His hunch paid off, because by the time Tim got to the basement entrance to My Alibi, he could hear yelling. It sounded on the cusp of devolving into full on violence, Dragos insisting someone in there had set him up, and a second party (male, Irish accent, smoker) telling him to shove it up his ass.

While it was very tempting to let them settle this among themselves, this whole endeavor had been to make a point, and that point required a little face-to-face clarity. At least until the trackers he left on the black Mercedes out front gave him the data he'd need to get Dragos behind bars, and away from the people Tim had promised protection.

He couldn't exactly go in there with a dog in his shirt though. Thinking quickly, Tim shed his outer jacket and unzipped the hoodie, wrapping the little pit bull up and tucked her in a side-alley.

"I'll be right back. Just need to go handle some things," he promised, running a hand over her velvety ears. Tim could almost hear the question in her whines as he walked away. The sounds spoke to that little place inside him that never really understood why his parents had to go, and why they couldn't take him with them.

He had a lot of practice ignoring that place.

There was no way Tim could go in there with his belts out of reach, so he left the sweater open, but, after a moment's thought, he flicked the hood up. He was going in there to all but pick a fight, no need to make his face easier to recognize than necessary.

"I swear to god, no one here went after your stupid fucking mutts, and if you don't shut up about it, you're not going to be complaining about anything much longer." It was the same man speaking, and he really seemed on the edge of losing his temper. A face to the name told Tim it was probably a representative of the Riley family. He was pretty sure he and Dick had dealt with him trying to muster something up during No Man's Land. He was a long way from the Cauldron.

"Well someone had to. Nine different fighting rings do not simply explode themselves. The fucking *cops* did not call themselves on the remaining one. Whoever thinks they can walk in and interfere with *my* business is going to *pay* ," Dragos snarled. He was noticeably younger than Tim had ever seen him, and for all that he wasn't in much better shape, he could probably at least try to run. Not that he'd make it out the door at this point.

Everyone in the room was watching the drama unfold, mostly relaxed at their various tables throughout the bar, but there was enough weaponry at hand to make things ugly in a hurry if they decided they wanted their entertainment a little more *interactive.* Time to step in.

Tim let his final step inside carry through the room, and he much more openly surveyed the scene, hands tucked in his pockets. "Dragos Ibanescu. A word, if you'd be so kind."

Dragos whirled, purple in the face and teeth bared. "The fuck do you want, foolish child?"

"I was hoping you'd be open to discussing how to ensure the next thing that goes up in smoke *won't* be your condo. A lovely place," Tim hadn't actually seen it in this time, but he remembered a murder investigation where B had casually remarked a Romanian wannabe mobster lived next door. He was banking on Dragos not being the type to move often. "And surely your neighbors deserve better than to be woken up in the middle of the night to an *unfortunate* accident."

"Who do you think you are?" Dragos stormed over, his goons shadowing his footsteps (both over six feet, moved with confidence so some kind of training, pistols in their coats and close quarters weapons in their pockets; he could take them).

Tim let himself grin, sharp with all of the built up tension of the last week, and leaned into the edge that had worked with everyone he met so far. "I'm the guy telling you to stay the fuck out of Crime Alley. Your cheap excuse for hired muscle couldn't extort a kiddie toy from a Happy Meal, and don't think no one noticed the whores you've been selling out of the city. Gotham is not your ball pit, and it's not your fucking livestock auction."

The temperature of the room dropped. Tim took a step forward.

“I don’t give a shit what you do in the rest of the city,” Lie. “But the next time you try to strongarm locals into a bogus protection racket, it won’t be just infrastructure going up.”

Dragos laughed; cold, cruel, and just a little scared. “You think you can tell *me* what to do, boy? I will take from you everyone you hold dear, and make you watch as they die one by one.”

“Been there, done that, didn’t even get a t-shirt. But please, go ahead and tell me more about how I’ll ‘rue the day,’ really. This discussion is a courtesy I won’t waste time with again.”

A small flick of Dragos’ hand had the guards advancing further, now sporting a sap to the left and a set of brass knuckles to the right. Very close quarters then. “Or I kill you now, plain and simple.”

Tim raised an eyebrow, casting a glance to the barkeep. “And here I thought this establishment frowned on bar fights.”

The woman snorted. “This won’t be a fight. Just a smartass punk being put in his place. If anything, it’s free comedy.”

“Well with that ringing endorsement…” Tim rolled his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug and closed the remaining distance.

Ducked the swing of the sap, followed by a crotch-shot, shove the man into his friend’s way as he doubled over. Tim kicked him hard in the back of the knee, and stepped back as Mr.Knuckles pushed the falling Sap Guy out of his way. He overreached on his punch, though, so Tim grabbed his wrist and drove his other elbow into his jaw, and followed through to swing the side of that fist across his cheekbone for a rewarding *crack*.

“You know, I’ll admit I might have been wrong. This is pretty funny.” Sap Guy staggered to his feet, and Tim used his grip on Mr.Knuckles to twist and throw them together. They went down in a heap of limbs. “You may want to consider staying down before I break anything else.”

He looked up into the barrel of a shaking gun.

Dragos had gone white, and his grip was unsteady, but if looks could kill he wouldn't need the pistol.

"Now let's not lie to ourselves, Dragos. You're not going to shoot me here. Least of all because you'd probably have to mop up the blood yourself." Tim shifted slowly, again missing the cape that would normally make the tiny movement invisible. "You're not going to shoot me, because if you do, the charges I've *already set* at your condo will go off in two hours when I don't refresh the delay. Your wife isn't home, right?" Bluff. Dragos was a coward, there was no way he would risk it. Show him teeth, all razor manners and dark promise. Tim lied. "I don't make empty threats, but hey. Your call."

The following string of curses was a fascinating mix of Romanian and English, that made Tim regret focusing on Ukrainian and Bulgarian for his Eastern European languages. He got the gist, sure, but he just knew there were nuances that were going straight over his head. It was always nice to know exactly *how* someone was threatening to kill you.

Alas, he'd gotten distracted by Arabic and Mandarin and their pretty, pretty alphabets, and never gotten around to going back. One day.

It took another moment, but as the rant died off, the gun finally went down.

"A pleasure, truly. If you're done, I'll be on my way. Things to do, bombs to stabilize and all that." Another visual sweep of the room told Tim odds were low of anyone trying to stop him, so he took the risk of turning around to leave. The confidence it projected was worth the trade off. *You wouldn't dare* .

He left the hood up until he reached the alley where he had left the dog. She was still there, nestled into the jacket and whining softly. Her ears twitched when Tim stepped off the street, but she didn't look up until he was crouched in front of her.

Big golden eyes blinked up at him, and for a brief second, as she tilted her head and her ears flopped, Tim half-expected her to start vibrating. He shook off the impression, and reached out slowly. When she didn't snap at him, he scooped her up and held her to his chest.

"Alright, pretty girl, time to go home."

The walk took much longer than swinging would have, but he kind of wanted the time to think through the next few days. Tracking gang movement, foraging for parts for the computer he was building in his kitchen cupboards, computing consultant work, and scouting properties for safe houses.

By the time he was climbing the stairs to his apartment he had several working plans, and his arms were starting to ache. All he really wanted to do was put the dog down, feed her some snack sausages, and pass out on his crappy bed.

That exhaustion was what he would blame, were anyone to ask why it took him so long to see the two boys sitting at his table.

Tim blinked at them.

"Luke?"

“We talked it over, and we’ve decided tonight is Chinese again. Jason is pretty sure he knows a place that can *finally* shut you up about green onion cake,” Luke said nonchalantly, then cocked his head at the bundle in Tim’s arms. “Did you get a dog? What’s its name?”

Tim barely registered the questions, brain latching onto the name and skittering his gaze over to the other boy, even as he reminded himself there were lots of kids named Jason, lots who were probably in bad situations, and there was no reason to think-

Who was he kidding. Gotham didn’t know the meaning of the word *coincidence* .

Jason Todd, smaller than Tim had ever seen, scowled back at him. “Are you going to pass the phone so I can call, or what?”

Chapter End Notes

Tbh I didn't expect to get this done this week. I have three papers in the next two weeks, and yet. Here we are. Also this got long but I was determined to get all these things done in this chapter. Success!

Tim is being productive! And building some semblance of a set-up. Hopefully it's enough prep for the things to come, but you know what they say about plans and first contact with the enemy. :3

The normal shoutout to Replacement Robin, for reminding me I can't just get excited about things down the line and need to actually write to get there, and the rest of the C&C discord for general motivation and a wonderful environment to write in.

Comments and kudos are wonderful and thrilling, but even just staring at the hit counter like a creep is great. I'd love to hear thoughts and feelings, but if that's not your thing I hope you enjoyed anyways!!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh boy. There was an itty bitty Jason in his kitchen, ordering takeout.

Luke was still looking at him expectantly, and Tim refused to be the kind of creep who stared at young boys, so he met Luke's gaze and let his mouth run on automatic while his brain tried to process. "I don't know if I'm keeping her yet, not sure the pet policy here, but she couldn't stay where she was."

"If you're not going to keep her, I'm stealing her," Luke said, completely serious. His hand twitched at his side. "Can I- Can I touch her?"

Although he was avoiding eye contact to engage in the call, Jason's head was tilted surreptitiously towards the puppy. He had already ordered several items and relayed Tim's address, so Tim had no idea what he was pretending to listen to. Hold music, maybe?

"It should be alright, just be careful and move slowly, okay? She's pretty nervous, and I don't know if she'll bite when startled."

Luke came over and offered a hand, letting the puppy sniff him before she nuzzled under his fingers. Jason quickly abandoned his pretense and came over as well, and soon both boys were stroking the small dog, who soaked up the attention like a velveteen sponge.

Jason glanced briefly at Tim. "You should name her something cool.

Like Macbeth, or Tamora."

"I get Tamora, but Macbeth was kind of a dick." Tim raised an eyebrow. "Either way, I'm not naming her after any of Shakespeare's characters because I refuse to yell a single one of those names."

"Not the guy! Lady Macbeth, she was a badass. But fine, if you want to be boring and *normal* about it," Jason scowled.

Luke looked up grinning. "She's gonna get big, right? How about something like Fang, or Killer?"

Tim bit back a laugh and grinned back. "Nah, people are nasty enough to pit bulls without encouraging it." He hummed, readjusting his grip and taking a seat at the table. It helped a little with the strain. "And she looks kind of like a runt, so I have no idea how big she'll get. I'll think about it. Luke, could you grab the package of hot dogs from the cooler?"

"You know, you should really get an actual fridge rather than just keeping this dumb cooler full of ice. You'd be able to keep multiple days of food like a real adult," Luke snarked, fetching the plastic wrapped sausages anyways. "Have you even got any plates yet, or are we still eating off of paper?"

"Don't diss the paper, I don't have to do any dishes. And I'll get a fridge when I can find someone to help me carry one up the stairs. Are you offering?" Tim raised an eyebrow, and started pulling apart the sausages to feed the dog.

It was Jason that snorted at that. "Is that what this is, trading food for free labour? Dunno why I expected anything better from a guy called *Alvin* ."

There was a pause in which Luke looked rapidly from Jason to Tim and back again. He opened his mouth, but remained wordless for about fifteen seconds. “ *Alvin?* How do you know that?”

Jason’s eyes widened slightly. “It’s on the shitty mailbox downstairs. ‘Alvin Draper.’”

“That’s a *terrible* name. No wonder you go by Tim. You look like a dork, but not enough for that,” Luke snickered.

“I dunno, I can kind of see it,” said Jason, squinting and tilting his head like a judgemental bird.

“Excuse you, if there are any chipmunks here, it’s you two. I am a perfectly respectable animal,” Tim feigned an imperious sniff. “Like a duck.”

The boys shared a look, and burst into laughter. The sudden noise startled the dog slightly, and she abandoned the hot dog she was chewing on to burrow into Tim’s stomach. Hard. Tiny claws scrabbled and she wriggled around, almost falling out of his lap. After a moment of gentle touches, she poked her head back out, and Tim glanced back up to see the boys shushing each other.

“Who wants to take her while I answer the door?” Tim asked.

Jason blinked at him and opened his mouth, presumably to ask why, when the delivery woman knocked on the frame of the doorway and he jumped a good half-foot in the air. Luke took the opportunity to dart over and scoop up the puppy, plopping to the ground once he had a solid grip on her.

“Jason, can you take the bags and start setting out the food, I’ll grab the plates in a second.” Tim asked over his shoulder, fishing out money for the delivery person. The exchange was quick, probably thanks to how late it was, and Jason popped up quickly to take the two bags over to the table.

The door stayed open.

Chopsticks came with the food, and really they *could* eat out of the boxes, but Tim wanted to try a few things, so he pulled the paper plates from their place under the sink and set three down on the table.

He cocked an eyebrow and looked down at Luke. "You know, you're probably going to have to put her down to eat."

Luke made a face, but gently set the dog on the floor, and scurried to the chair next to Jason. Coincidentally, or maybe not, leaving the chair closest to the door without its back turned, and the one furthest from the door and with its back to the wall, both empty. Thoughtful brat.

The meal progressed with little fanfare, Tim refusing to concede ground even though the spring roll *were* some of the best he'd ever had states-side. After only a few minutes, the puppy had settled into place under the table and Tim pretended not to see the boys slipping her food.

He did, however, notice Jason had a distinctly fork-shaped lump in his pocket, when he got up to get some water. How had he even found the cutlery? It was currently being kept *in* the oven.

No time like the present, Tim supposed, so he also got up and loudly made his way over to the counter, trying not to spook Jason. He had no desire to get panic stabbed by this tinier version, after all.

The noise did its job, and Jason whirled around, pressing his hands to the counter and glaring at Tim, but not saying a word.

Tim carefully telegraphed his movements as he opened the cupboard next to Jason's head and pulled from it a stack of plastic cups. Wordlessly, he offered it to Jason, who snatched the top cup with a huff and turned to the sink.

Tim took the opportunity to snag back his fork, and slip it into his hoodie.

Thankfully, Luke was too busy feeding all of the food on Tim's plate to the dog to notice.

Rude.

“You could feed her food that isn’t someone else’s. But let me guess, where’s the fun in that?” Tim asked, knowing even as he said it that his dinner was finished.

Sure enough, he got a stuck-out tongue for his trouble and Luke made direct eye-contact as he scraped the last of the lo-mein onto the floor where the puppy licked it up, before showering her with kisses. Kids truly were the real menaces to society.

"Speaking of creating opportunities for kids to eat food that doesn't belong to them," both sets of eyes turned to him, and Tim knew he

had to phrase this very carefully. "Winter in Gotham sucks, and the only thing worse is winter on the streets at night. I'm thinking about setting up a few hole-in-the-wall hiding spots where I can stash food and leave on the heating. How do I do that in a way that kids will know about, and will feel safe going to?"

As he spoke, Tim carefully made his way over to his chair and sat down, palms laid flat on the table. No amount of trying to appear non-threatening could really counter the weight of the trust he was asking for, but Tim *knew* Jason as a much harder version of himself, and even that man had only ever wanted the best for the kids of Crime Alley. Luke was genuinely a good kid and maybe a touch too trusting. Tim could probably do this without them, but it would mean so much more, go so much faster, if it was the kids who spread the message and decided it was worth the risk.

A quiet voice added that if he got them on-board, even if he disappeared tomorrow, they might work together and make the effort anyways. Only if he could give them a good enough plan to work with.

They were silent as they stared, and while it wasn't hostile, there certainly wasn't enough friendliness to open up, so Tim spoke again. "I know approximate numbers, and I have some ideas, but I don't know how effective those would be from the kids' perspectives. Would keys hidden in marked locations be the kind of thing that's too easy for someone else to catch onto? Are apartments better than converted condemned buildings? Is ground-floor better because quick escapes, or worse because there's an increased risk of break-ins? I have every intention of re-stocking the food, but how do I keep track of consumption without excessively invading the privacy of whoever might be in there at the time?"

The silence this time was thicker, not as heavy, but filled with contemplation instead. Better than the suspicion it had been.

"You don't have to tell me anything. I have until around October and the first snowfall to figure this out, but if you ever feel like giving me your two cents, apparently you know how to pick my lock so please do come talk to me, or leave a note or something."

Luke buried his face in the dog's side, and she licked at the top of his head. Jason didn't take his eyes off of Tim.

"How do we know you're not trying to get us to help you kidnap a bunch of kids?"

Tim looked him in the eye, and kept his breathing level. It was a fair question. "There aren't actually a lot of ways to prove that for you. I can keep you as involved as possible, show you blueprints, let you check out locations with or without me, and you can tell anyone anything you want. But that's not worth a whole lot, I know."

"That the best you've got?" Jason asked tonelessly.

"For now. Like I said, I have a few months to figure things out and set them up. I'll be working on this whether you choose to help or not. It's perfectly fine that you don't trust me, and you don't have to change your mind." Tim didn't try to put any kind of spin on his words. There wasn't much he could say that would help his case, and Tim didn't want to discourage the kind of suspicion that could save their lives one day.

The air was left an uncomfortable kind of heavy, and Tim couldn't let it fester, not with Luke refusing to look up and Jason's hollow gaze. "In the meantime, what do you think about Gertrude, as a name? Lots of nickname potential, and pretty."

Twin denials chorused through the air, and discussion of the

weaknesses and merits of grandma names took over until the boys finished their dinner and wandered off for the evening. They put up almost no fight when Tim insisted they each take a box of leftovers, and they closed the door on the way out.

Tim made cursory attempts to clean up, putting the remaining boxes in his ice chest, and tossing the used plates in the garbage. He'd wash the cups later, since none of them had picked up any cracks over dinner. One was left on the floor for the puppy to drink from, and he piled his clothes into a nest for her. He'd find a better dog bed for her tomorrow.

By the time he finally got himself settled for the night, Tim was all but asleep on his feet, and the sirens that had been near constant since the explosions were mercifully silent.

…

What wasn't silent was the scritch of tiny claws scrabbling across the floor. Nor was the *whumph* of his cheap mattress compressing under the sudden weight of a wriggly body that quickly wormed its way up against Tim's chest.

The pup squirmed and licked his nose, eyes flashing in the dim light that slipped through the blinds. She let out a little chirping yip and tried to burrow in closer.

Tim laughed quietly. "Alright, chatty bird, calm down."

Her tail thumped against his lap, twice, and she made a valiant attempt to coat his entire face in saliva.

"Like that nickname? I don't think I can yell that any more than one of

Jason’s Shakespearean names, but we could do something close. Maybe something a little nostalgic, hm?” Tim smoothed a hand over her ears. “How does Redbird sound to you?”

The little dog tucker her head under Tim’s chin and her tail beat a rhythm against the covers for a moment, before slowing as her breathing relaxed.

“I guess that settles it. Goodnight, Redbird.”

--

Today was the day.

Time for Tim's first major impact on the timeline, and, hopefully, his first chance to get picked up. He was pretty sure he had found the right balance between *different* and *reality-breaking* that ought to put him on people's radar.

No pressure.

Tim had decided the best thing to do was to allow events to play out mostly as they had, with enough alterations to mitigate the worst of the trauma for everyone involved. *That* had been a sleepless night of cause-and-effect charts to decide just what he could afford to get away with, without ruining everything and preventing Dick from learning what he needed to.

He wasn't even going to touch all that nonsense with the League of Assassins guy, if he could help it. It had seemed to work out fine last time around, and in the wise words of some loser on the internet; if it

ain't broke, don't fix it. And anyways, everyone deserved their own chance to run with and reject the League. It was like a Bat rite of passage or something.

Dick never really talked about the specifics of that anyways, so it's not like Tim had a lot to work with on that front, though he was thinking of ways to prevent the hit on Dent from being called out in the first place. How often did Ra's change his passwords?

None of that meant Tim wasn't going to sneak into Harvey's weird mock execution. Just in case.

Tim wasn't dumb enough to leave things to a couple of coin flips going the way he wanted, after all.

Which was why he was currently floating inside the trick platform, rebreather in place, and waiting for the judge to drop. The bug he had set in the room was linked to his comm, so he would hear the conversation, as a precautionary measure, but one way or another at least one man was going to be coming for a swim with him because Two Face was an asshole.

"What *possessed* him?" and speak of the fashion-blind devil himself. Harvey was gearing up for a full rant, it sounded like, and all Tim could do was wait, suspended in the darkness.

Outside the tank, there were two henchman, one double-sided full-scale Arkhamite, a vic-in-waiting, and two restrained vigilantes.

No wonder the judge died first last time; Two Face must have had an aneurysm over the odd man out.

"The odds are fifty-fifty, what are the stakes, kid?" which meant the game was afoot. According to the case files Tim had read, Dick had won both coin tosses, and if it wasn't for Harvey having a back-up plan, pure luck would have saved the day.

Dick gave his terms, and there was a beat of quiet from the comm. The only thing Tim could hear was the hiss of his rebreather and the weighty swell of the water, like a dull, unending groan.

"So the judge is the first. How about best two out of three?" Dick's voice was higher than Tim had heard in a long time, stirring memories of bright lights and fleshy crunches. Appealing to Two Face's love of duality was the right play here, but relying on luck was a sure way to get burned, in the long run.

But the first coin toss had gone off well. And this younger Dick really did have a different kind of confidence than he wore as he grew. Maybe Dick liked his odds. Or maybe he still didn't quite understand just how wrong these things could go, *would* go, if the power was left in the hands of criminals. Playing by other people's rules was a fast and easy way to get innocents killed.

Second set of terms, trying to double it up, and the silence swallowed Tim again.

Tim hoped Dick's good luck held out.

Two Face's laugh shattered that hope.

"No dice, kid! Shame, I could've respected a two'fer." Liar. Harvey's steps were heavy on the platform, reverberating through the water, as he walked to the lever that would drop the floor from beneath the judge's feet.

Tim knew exactly where it was; he'd had to for this plan, after all.

The quiet lurched over Tim again, and it was all the warning he got before the darkness split, and it was the bug, not his ears, that caught the *snap* of the rope giving way. Lawrence Watkins splashed in the water, squirming even as his hood soaked through. Normally, that, and the ropes knotted at his hands and feet, would be enough to damn him.

Good thing Tim wasn't one for 'normal' circumstances when he could help it.

Careful to stay out of the shaft of light cutting into the water, Tim yanked the judge out of sight and worked off his hood with one hand, pressing his spare rebreather into Watkins' mouth with the other. Once he was fairly confident the man wasn't going to drown, Tim held him steady, not yet making an attempt at the ropes. It wasn't vital that the judge didn't see him, but it *was* important he stay down until the confrontation above was finished.

There was still a chance Tim might not need to intervene.

"What kind of good for nothing rope did you boys pick up?" Harvey snarled, his shadow still looming over the pool.

"We're still one bet short. Best two out of three, right? We're at one each," Dick called out, before Two Face could really get going, and cutting off any protest from the two goons.

The shadow withdrew, as Two Face fixated back on the boy and moved towards him. "Very true. So what'll it be?"

Tim’s mic wasn't good enough to pick up much more than rustling, and some sort of muffled yell in Batman's timber, but eventually Dick did answer. "Clean side up, and you untie me."

Two Face laughed again, not quite Joker-crazy, but hearing it both crackling through the comm and warped through the walls of the tank did a good job of making up the difference.

“Bold little shit. No, this time, I'm setting the stakes. Who dies first, you or the Bat?"

Another unintelligible cry from Batman, and the sound of impact. Tim's heart was jammed up against his rebreather, and pounding.

"C'mon, brat. Call it."

Whatever it was Dick said, it was too quiet for his equipment to pick up. He wished he knew what to hope for.

The flip could have taken a second or an hour, and all Tim could do was watch the fluorescent light roll and spin through as much of the water as it could reach. The judge was worryingly limp in his grip, but Tim could feel him breathing, and he didn't have the capacity to worry about him when his tiny older brother was twenty feet away and at Two Face's non-existent mercy.

“Well look at that. She’s clean.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! This took a while for a number of reasons, including

family coming into town and having to be a Good Cousin and trying to sort out my life post-exams. Funnily enough, really wanting to post Christmas chapter before February was actually a big motivator here. Hopefully I can manage that sooner rather than later, but I make no promises.

And so things progress! Tim is the best Weird Guy and he is trying so hard here. So hard. Also, I have no idea why I thought it was the DA that got killed, because it was definitely a judge. I went back to previous chapters and fixed that. A couple pieces of dialogue are ripped from issue 2 of Robin: Year One; Two Face's first two lines, and Dick's first line. The rest is mine.

Thanks to everyone for their patience on this, and as usual thank you so much to ReplacementRobin and the CaC server because otherwise I would definitely have lost focus by now. Kudos and comments are very much appreciated, but not required, and I hope you all have a wonderful holiday season!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even with an answer, Tim still held his breath, though distantly he knew he should be getting oxygen while he could in case he needed to give Bruce his rebreather.

This time Batman's cry was clear. "Robin!"

Which was Tim's cue that events were intact. Now he could only hope the sabotaged bat and ropes did their jobs and minimized the beating he knew was about to take place. He'd wait for five hits, and if Batman was still tied up, Tim would step in.

The meaty sound of a fist impacting flesh and the quieter crunch of a broken nose, followed by a small body hitting the floor.

One.

Two Face mocked the fallen boy, mocked an injured *twelve year-old* , and gave some inane quip about durability, cut in half by a *thunk* and slight whine, a blow to the stomach with something heavy. That would be the bat. Tim had kind of assumed there would be a bigger lead up to pulling that out, but then again Two Face wasn't known for fucking around.

Two .

A crunch crackled through Tim's earpiece. He could almost imagine

the whimper that *had* to accompany what he was fairly certain was at least three ribs being broken, and his eyes clenched shut.

What was taking Batman so long?

Three .

Had his sabotage of the ropes not been good enough? He thought that by fraying the various strands over the length of it that Batman would be able to brute-force snap them, but maybe not.

Or maybe someone had noticed and they used different ropes.

Dick cried out again, drowning out the sound of the blow itself, but not the following crack that Tim could only hope was the bat splintering.

Two Face wasn't likely to keep going with a broken weapon, so it ought to be back to his fists. Probably.

Four.

The judge twitched under his hands, and Tim realized at some point he had tightened his grip enough to bruise. He tried to loosen his grasp, but his fingers weren't responding.

The mic caught the barest edge of a whine, cut off before it could rise in volume, and it set Tim's teeth on edge. Dick must've been trying so hard to suppress the sounds of his pain, but he was just a *kid* . An

image of a crumpled boy, all bright colours and blood, clung to the back of Tim's eyelids. His imagination had more than enough experience with fallen Robins and injured brothers to make it painfully vivid.

Four was practically five, right?

Tim blinked as rapidly as the water would allow and tugged the judge behind him. He refused to listen to any more of this.

" *Robin!* "

Finally. The sounds of a fight were brief, and not clear enough to really follow the action, but the ensuing silence was enough to suggest Batman had taken Robin to get medical attention.

Thank god.

Tim gave it another forty-five count before dragging the judge with him into the shaft of light and swimming to the top of the tank. Peering up over the lip, Tim confirmed Two Face and his idiots were out for the count but the GCPD had yet to arrive, giving him a narrow window get the judge back on the platform and unconscious, leaving none the wiser.

Hauling a fully grown man out of the water was definitely a work out, reminding Tim in some distant corner of his brain that he really needed to find a discreet way to upkeep his strength. Maybe he could set up a gym in the warehouse he was still sort of keeping custody of?

The rest of him was twitching with pent-up energy. Everything had

gone close enough to the plan, but that meant Tim had done next to nothing while his family was at risk, and now with nothing to do Tim *burned* . The first time back in his suit since he ended up here, and he hadn't even hit anyone.

He gave the judge a second to blink at the dusty warehouse lights, and, before he could roll over to get a look at his unexpected saviour, dosed him with a fast-acting sedative. Hopefully that would keep him under until the police arrived, and would be enough to make his statement disoriented and unclear.

Sanitizing his rebreather was going to be a pain without the proper equipment.

Tim swung up to the rafters and watched from the shadows as the police ran in, cuffing the unconscious criminals and calling EMTs to the unmoving judge's side. Gordon was onsite and coordinating, and Tim had to stomp down the reflex to give him a breakdown of the situation. That would probably only confuse everyone involved.

Now was as good a time as any to go for a patrol. No risk of being caught, after all, not with Batman busy tending to his injured bird.

Sneaking out through a skylight, Tim left the scene and went to work.

--

Patrol was good. Cathartic. And there was something centering about the extra challenge of not being seen in the take-downs or travel. It reminded him what he was hoping to accomplish, making things better without adding an extra player. Not letting himself get tied up in local affairs.

Though he hadn't done a very good job of that, he could admit to himself. The people here were just so easy to care about, and Tim had never been one to turn his back on a bad situation he could change.

Tim could also admit to himself that he wasn't being particularly generous with the criminals tonight. Looking back most of his training had been about keeping alive against people he had no business fighting, a style built around avoiding hits and capitalizing on openings. Even as Robin Tim had been meant for shadows and choke-holds, not open brawls and firefights. The same four, admittedly sort of brutal strikes could get him through most fights if he caught his opponents off-guard.

He was thankful Young Justice had kept him on his toes for just about anything, and his arsenal creative. If Batman had gotten his way, Tim would probably be mostly armed with various tasers and gas bombs with all of his more diverse compounds left in the lab. As it was, Red Robin still carried everything from an explosive foam that was essentially a stabilized cousin of napalm, to industrial lubricant.

The attempted muggings were easy enough to deal with, just keeping himself out of the victim's line of sight for the most part by using throwing discs, his bo, or, in one memorable instance, a live cat. They'd likely have some weird stories for the police, but given the rest of the night's events it was unlikely Batman would notice anything odd.

In other words, so long as no one got any pictures of Red Robin, he was in the clear for the night.

Victims were trickier without being able to reassure them himself. Tim didn't like leaving them to recover alone, but they were safe and that was what mattered.

Smoke bombs were excellent for making up the difference for larger groups, letting him work without being identifiable. There was a part of him calculating the cost of replacing each pellet and how he could go about that himself without ending up on any watch-lists. Pfft. As if he had a traceable IP address or even a legal identity.

Tim made sure to keep track of the street corners with working girls, and the dilapidated alleys addicts trekked in and out of. He watched the kids darting behind dumpsters and the late night traffic that stuck to the streetlights. A surprising number of the faces he saw were familiar, but he couldn't place many names.

He could work on that, when he was out of the suit.

Embarrassingly, the only injury he took over the course of the night was from a protruding broken drainpipe he had backed into while trying to avoid tripping over a rat's nest. It wasn't serious, but it had managed to pierce his suit and his skin at the elbow joint. He was going to have to be more careful with this armour considering he had no way to replace or even effectively repair any of its parts without leaving a potential vulnerability.

It was nice to be back on the metaphorical horse, but there was something that felt wrong about wearing a mask like this in a city still so full of life. Red Robin was meant for clawing back the dark before it could swallow them all whole, for a hope bordering on dogma, not protecting a people who were already trying to do that themselves.

Crime Alley needed something else. Maybe Tim would stick around to figure out what that was.

--

Tim regretted every nice thing he had said about anything ever. Especially Gotham.

Was it too much to ask to not get an infection from what was, quite literally, a flesh wound?

Apparently.

It wasn't bad, yet. The edges were red, angry, and hot, and Tim could feel his pulse in its throbbing, but he wasn't overly feverish and he wasn't disoriented. Yet. He had time to find antibiotics and then everything would be fine.

Redbird kept trying to lick it, and after being rebuffed over and over she was settled onto his feet, softly whining. It wasn't fair that she sounded so miserable when it was Tim who's immune system decided to act like a trash fire.

Fuck, was Leslie's clinic up and running yet?

Tim was pretty sure it was, was pretty sure Leslie had been running it since Bruce was a kid, but he couldn't bring a date to mind.

It was worth a shot.

As if triggered by his resolution to get out of bed, Tim's front door swung open.

“This is your regularly scheduled check in to make sure you haven’t died in a gutter.” Luke’s voice was just loud enough to drive a spike of pain into the back of Tim’s head. He tried to tell himself that was enough to make him want Luke to leave.

“Not dead, just sick,” Tim croaked, burrowing back under his blanket, all resolve to get up gone.

The weight on his feet scrambled away and the air was filled with quiet yipping.

A second, more obnoxious, creak of hinges signaled his bedroom door being opened and Tim valiantly resisted the urge to hiss. It would do nothing but demean them all.

“Vomiting sick or just shaky-can’t-walk sick?”

On the one hand, Tim knew that was in no way a challenge, on the other if he let an infection keep him down when he had patrolled with the *Clench* his ego may never recover. With a groan he rolled off his bed, taking a minute face-down on the floor to reevaluate the importance he gave to presenting a respectable face to the neighbourhood. At this moment, he found he really couldn’t care less.

“Neither. I have an infection because my immune system is secretly an analogy for Gotham’s legal system.”

“So you’re not contagious?” Luke apparently didn’t wait for an answer, because a shoe poked him in the back of the head, forcing him to roll-over.

Tim glared with no actual heat. “No that’s not how that works. I just need to get some antibiotics and then a nap, and everything will be fine.”

Luke looked a little alarmed, though he absently ran a hand across Redbird’s ears. “Where’re you gonna get *those* ? I don’t think I know anyone who does legal drugs. There’s gotta be someone, but there’s no way it’ll be clean.”

“I’m hoping the Thompkins clinic will give me a prescription. Not like people are going around getting high off penicillin.” Tim stood carefully, compensating for the slight shake of his knees by locking them. One glance at the clothes piled on his closet floor and he wrote that off as a waste of time. Everything that stood between him and getting back to bed needed to be avoided if at all possible.

Next concern was whether the clinic was where Tim remembered it being. It hadn’t moved since he hit the streets, but that wasn’t a guarantee.

He should have checked on it weeks ago.

Should haves weren’t going to help him now, so Tim stiffly made his way into his kitchen and stuck his head into the sink to drink from the tap. Hydration was important. And so were socks, though he wasn’t actually sure where his were.

Luke and Redbird trailed after him, neither making any effort to make his life even a little bit easier.

“You’re gonna buy meds from a pharmacy? You have some kind of insurance for that?” Luke asked, swaying in and out of Tim’s field of vision, both trying to make eye contact and avoiding it.

No sign of socks under the table or any of the rest of his scant furniture, and now Tim's head was swimming from bending down to check. Had he hidden them somewhere weird to stop sticky fingers last time Luke had brought kids around?

"I'm self-employed, the only benefits I have are that I get to sleep in and I can tell clients to go fuck themselves if I want," Tim said, rifling through cabinets. "But I do need them, so I'll figure something out. How expensive can antibiotics be?"

A tugging at his pant leg pulled his head and attention out of the cupboard, full of wiring that would probably constitute a fire hazard if it were actually attached to any kind of power source, just in time for something soft to collide with his face instead of the back of his head.

It was reflex more than thought that caught the little bundle before it could hit the floor, and Tim looked down to look at what he'd just been assaulted with.

Ah, socks.

He unfolded them quickly and tugged them on, balancing against the counter and shooting a smile over at Luke. "Thanks. Do you want to come with me to waiting room hell, or would you mind taking Redbird out with you for a couple of hours? She needs the air and I don't want to leave her here alone. She'll get anxious and might try to eat my bed again."

Luke snorted. "She's probably just trying to get at the mice I bet are living in it. But yeah we can escort you to the clinic and go find a park or something."

“Don’t even joke about that, I have every intention of spending at least twelve hours in that bed later.” Tim pointed a warning finger at him. God, that was one way to motivate him to stay awake. “And I’m pretty sure there aren’t any parks nearby, and I’d prefer if you don’t go far so I can find you easily when I’m done.”

“Not a *real* park, like Robinson,” Luke rolled his eyes. “We both know there ain’t any green spaces this side of town. But there’s an old swing-set and teeter-totter a couple of blocks from the clinic and I can take her there.”

Tim thought about it, for a moment. While he wouldn’t want Luke going to a sketchy playground at night, it was still early and he *would* have Redbird with him. She was a sweetheart and pretty small, but a dog ought to be enough to dissuade at least casual criminals. And it would only be for as long as it took to get a prescription.

“Sounds like a plan, but if anything weird happens you come get me, okay? Even if it’s just someone making you uncomfortable,” he cocked a grin. “Redbird might try for you, but her teeth aren’t big enough to do much damage yet.”

Luke huffed at him, puffing up his cheeks like an offended squirrel. “Alright, you giant worrywart. But just so we’re clear; it’s a park, at like. Noon. I’m not gonna get jumped by a preschooler.”

Well he certainly hoped not, but Tim’s paranoia hadn’t been unreasonable for years.

He wouldn’t hold his breath.

Chapter End Notes

> This certainly took me much longer than I would have liked. I blame a combination of exams, hockey, and getting dragged into

a Star Wars period of three and a half weeks that resulted in almost 2000 words of fic I'm not sold on posting.

But hey! This is here and I am still motivated to continue! Just slower now? I actually now have some stuff written for a while down the line, as well, which is kind of neat. We'll keep trucking along and hopefully one day those'll be relevant.

Tim is having a bit of a time, but at least things are leveling out for him. And he's gotten through the first encounter with canon events with things staying mostly intact. With any luck he'll be able to keep that up, but then again, when has Tim ever been known for being lucky?

See y'all again soon (I hope), and have a wonderful day!! <3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk was largely uneventful. Redbird was thrilled to be out and about, and Luke was enamored with her curiosity. Together they ducked in and out of alleys, damn near giving Tim a heart attack every time they left his field of vision, and more than once Redbird tried to climb into a trashcan only to be stopped by a laughing Luke.

It wasn't quite enough to put Tim into a good mood, too busy cursing the sun that nipped at his headache, but it certainly made the trip less of a chore than it would have been.

They parted ways at the door to the clinic, Tim extracting a promise to come back in a couple of hours if he hadn't come to find them yet. Luke rolled his eyes, but agreed before bounding off, Redbird following after Tim gently shooed her away.

Inside the clinic was like entering another dimension. It was both exactly like the clinic he remembered, and completely different and it made his skin crawl. The walls were a different shade of off-white and while the chairs were the same their covers were relatively clean and unbroken. Tim swore some of the magazines on the shin-buster table were the same ones he had thumbed through more than once.

Similarly, the occupants were both completely new and exactly the same as he was used to. Overworked parents with cranky kids, exhausted labourers with plastered limbs, and the occasional person who seemed mostly fine. And, of course, Bruce lurking in the corner like the creep he was.

Wait.

Bruce was what? What the hell was he doing here? Tim bit back the urge to do a double-take, instead making his way carefully to the admissions desk and trying to ignore the phantom of an assessing gaze scorching the back of his neck.

The nurse at the desk gave him a wan smile, and handed him a clipboard heavy with paperwork, sending him back to fill it out. Tim took the opportunity looking for a pen gave him to confirm that yes, that was definitely Bruce and yes, any more than a passing glance would put him right on the man's post-injured child hypervigilant radar.

He took a deep breath, and immediately regretted it as his lungs rebelled and he ended up hacking into his elbow until his vision blurred and his chest ached. Sitting down sounded like a wonderful idea.

Unfortunately the only socially acceptable seat (at least two chairs from anyone else given the room's occupants and the glances they were giving him for his outburst) put him just at the edge of Bruce's brooding shadow. Of course it did.

Between the tears Tim had to blink back and the effort he had to put into walking carefully, Tim berated himself for not realizing that *of course* Bruce would take an injured Dick to Leslie, and *of course* they would be there for multiple days. God only knew what the on-the-record excuse for the injuries were, but it was completely predictable and there was no reason Tim hadn't realized that beyond his own selfish focus on his own problems.

He should have gone to a different clinic, or at least waited a week before getting help. Caving after only a few days of feeling sick? Could

he *get* more pathetic?

So wrapped up in his own head, Tim didn't notice the hand entering his field of vision until it tapped a pen on the clipboard he had spaced-out in front of. The tap threw the loop of his thoughts completely, and it was only luck and an iron grip on his upper arm that kept him from hitting the floor.

"You've been staring at the admission forms for almost three minutes. It looked like you forgot a pen?" Bruce's baritone was a little flat, a little mechanical, like this tiny compassion was both forced and automatic. Someone needed a pen, he had one, so of course he would offer it, even if his heart wasn't in it.

Tim wanted to hurl, but he took the pen with a hand he willed not to shake. He couldn't quite manage to look up past Bruce's chin. "Thanks. I uh. I forgot to grab one before I sat down and wasn't sure if I could stand up safely."

Lips at the edge of his vision tugged into a frown. "You don't look well, do you need help filling those out?"

"No!" Tim jerked back and the hand holding him released instantly. "I. No thank you. I just have an infection, I don't need any help. Just needed a second to clear my head, you know?"

This was the part where he ought to redirect, ask what Bruce was doing here and keep the conversation as far from himself as possible, except he already *knew* why Bruce was here, and the idea of feigning ignorance when it was *his* fault Dick was injured at all was. Repulsive. Vile. Made him want to beg for forgiveness or cry. Maybe both.

So he kept his mouth shut and ducked his head low again, waiting for

the forms to come into focus.

His white-knuckle grip on the pen made his hands ache, but it was high enough quality to hold up under the pressure and he was sure it would write like a dream anyways. Tim hadn't even had a pen this nice when he was working for WE, and signing his name on more documents than any sane man would contemplate.

Bruce was still staring at him, Tim was certain. Of course he was, he wanted his pen back and Tim was being inconvenient by wasting ti- No. That was absurd. As far as Tim knew, Bruce had never once cared significantly about a material object that hadn't belonged to someone he loved, and there was no way he would loan out something like that.

He was probably staring because Tim still hadn't started on the forms and it was going on seven minutes since he sat down. He willed himself to take a deep breath, only to remember at the last second just how that had turned out before as his chest burned sharply and he doubled over.

This coughing fit lasted longer, long enough that when it finally stopped and Tim pressed his forehead against the cool, spittle-covered paper, he could feel a warm hand rubbing the space between his shoulders in soothing circles.

Tim squeezed his eyes shut tight against the heat building behind them and asked what he had done to deserve this.

But he couldn't stay in this fragile darkness forever, or even much longer, so with a carefully shallow inhale, Tim sat back up and rubbed his eyes clear. If he could just get these forms filled out he could stand up and get away from all the gentle things he wasn't allowed to have here.

Actually doing that was easier said than done, since Tim had to decide whether or not to lie for every question. His medical history was fraught with incidents, after all, and it left a bad taste in his mouth to lie in what was once (would one day be?) a safe place for honesty, but there were things he couldn't explain. Not in full, at least.

There was also the fact Bruce was blatantly reading over his shoulder. Anything too dramatic and he risked attracting even more attention than he already had, but it was hard to downplay things like *emergency splenectomy* and *multiple incidents of septic shock* that really did need to be included. At least it didn't ask for anything more incriminating like all major past injuries, and his current problem was actually not a big concern in the grand scheme of things.

Something niggled at Tim, suggesting he had forgotten something important about his medical situation, but the form was complete and he hadn't needed to lie about anything too serious, so he brushed it off and shakily got to his feet.

The hand from his back, the one that hadn't left the entire time he was writing, steadied him and it was with more effort than Tim would like to admit that he shrugged it off and none-too-gently shoved the pen into it instead.

"Thanks. Sorry to bother you," he mumbled, staring at his own mismatched socks before shuffling carefully back to the admissions desk.

He didn't hear a response, but that might have been the white noise buzzing in his head.

--

By the time he sat down in the exam room, Tim really just wanted to collect his hooligans and go back to bed.

Thankfully, it was only a brief wait before the door swung open and Leslie walked in. Tim had really hoped he'd get some resident or something, but at this point his mother could storm in and call him a disappointment and he would only be a little surprised.

Weirdly, Leslie's attention wasn't on what he assumed were his admissions form, as they so often were when she had to go quickly from patient to patient, but instead her gaze zeroed in on his own before searching across his face. He had no idea what she was looking for, but whatever she found made her lips thin.

"So Mr. Draper, you're here about an infection?" her tone carried a professionally edged displeasure, though Tim couldn't imagine why. It's not like she was familiar with his reckless exploits. Not yet, anyways.

He tried a winning smile, even as it tugged at his chapped lips awkwardly. "Yes ma'am. I had a run in with a broken pipe and I guess I didn't do a good enough job of cleaning it out afterwards."

"I'd like to take a look at it, if that's alright." Her words were a courtesy and they both knew it, Leslie already pulling on disposable gloves from the box on the wall and taking a step towards him.

Tim shrugged out of his hoodie, the chill of the room biting through his cheap sleep shirt immediately. He offered his arm out, palm up, and ignored the slight shake in his fingertips. Leslie took hold of his wrist, slight heat seeping through the rubber as she probed the edges of the wound.

It was an ugly thing, for all that it was so small. Leslie's already tense shoulders tightened further as she swept away a drop of milky yellow pus that welled in the wake of her touch.

"Well it certainly is infected, so I'll get you a prescription for some antibiotics." She stripped her gloves and tossed them in a corner, but made no move to leave the exam room. Instead she fixed Tim with a steely look like she was waiting for something.

He hesitated, running through his haphazard list of things she could possibly be upset about. Was there an issue with getting supplies to the clinic? Did she somehow know he was responsible for a not-insignificant number of the injuries she had to deal with the night he went on patrol? Maybe she just thought he was an idiot?

After a long moment Leslie spoke again. "Are you going to tell me how you really got that injury, or should I just expect you to be turning up here and lying to me semi-regularly from now on?"

Tim blinked. "Excuse me?"

"That's a yes, then."

"Doctor Thompkins, I don't know what you're talking about," Tim tried.

"If someone is hurting you, you don't need to protect them. They're clearly more than capable of doing that themselves." Leslie's tone didn't exactly soften, but the edge was no longer directed at him. A spike of nostalgia drove into Tim's chest and he fought to keep it off his face.

This was fine. Weird, but fine. “Ma’am I promise no one’s hurting me. I have a tendency to get into trouble, but this was just an accident and my own stupidity.”

Leslie hummed her displeasure. “You’re too young to be getting involved with that kind of violence.”

Oh god this *was* about the guys he beat up on patrol. How did she know it had been him?

“There’s plenty of things you can do without joining a gang. You’re young. Learn a trade. You don’t have to consider yourself a write-off just because everyone else does.” This time there was an unabashedly gentle curl to her words and the whole situation gave Tim vertigo. Or maybe that was the headache reaching new heights.

Tim didn’t give enough of a damn to stop the laugh that bubbled out. “Doctor Thompkins, I’m not in a gang. Nor am I trying to join one.”

He got a disbelieving eyebrow for his efforts. “Normal young men with no association with violence don’t have scars across their throats.”

Unbidden Tim’s hand went to his neck, fingertips tracing the faded silvery line he hadn’t thought about in a while. Okay, yeah. That probably looked pretty bad in terms of undeclared injuries. But given there was literally no record of any of his injuries anywhere, this was still fine. Tim tilted his mouth sardonically, playing the trouble-maker youth. “Oh come on, Doc. No one around here has *no* association with violence. But I can handle myself when trouble comes knocking.”

"The evidence of life threatening injuries says otherwise," Leslie

scoffed. "But I know your type. There's nothing I can actually say to change your mind about this, is there?"

Tim's smile faded to something more honest, just an apologetic curl. "No, not really. I am being careful, if it helps."

Leslie just shook her head and turned away. "You can pick up your prescription from the front desk. I had better not see you in here any time soon."

"Ma'am yes, ma'am," Tim tried a sloppy salute, and though it made his head spin it was worth it.

He carefully picked his way back down to the waiting room, trying to gauge how long he'd been here. A couple of hours, at least, but he wouldn't be sure of much more until he got outside.

The nurse at the front desk was efficient, if somewhat lacking in anything resembling bedside manner, and it was only a couple of minutes until he was heading for the door, carefully avoiding eye contact with the broody man in the corner who was tracking his progress.

If he didn't look, it wasn't real.

Outside was less a breath of fresh air and more a hammer to the head with the sudden sharp lighting change and midday noises. Based on the sun and traffic it was about three in the afternoon, which meant it was well past time to go find Luke. Where had he said the playground was, again?

Tim set off in what he hoped was the right direction, hands buried in his pockets. He had his prescription, all he needed was to go pick up the meds and then sleep off the worst of it while his body remembered how to function. It would be unpleasant, but should only put him down for another day or two and then he'd be good to go. Which was a relief, since he had some IT responsibilities to check on at the docks and a couple of the industrial plants he had managed to talk his way into. And of course he needed to be up and about to keep an eye on the League of Assassin's fellow that was coming into town soon.

It's not that he *wanted* to get involved with that in any way (it was important Dick got his assassin internship, after all), but his skin would be crawling the entire time to know this guy was here and not where he was. It would be monitoring only.

Speaking of monitoring, his safe-house project needed him to actually take legal custody of a couple of the places he was hoping to use and Tim hadn't decided how he was going to do that just yet. He couldn't exactly afford multiple properties on his current wage, and while he *could* steal some from somewhere, he was pretty sure Luthor would notice funds going missing and investigate. Eventually.

Maybe he could steal money from some other ne'er-do-well closer to home? Gotham was full of assholes with more money than they deserved.

Tim wondered how the Iceberg Lounge was doing financially these days.

His musings were broken by the sound of a gunshot only a street away. The playground.

Tim took off, sprinting around the corner in time to see some asshole in a leather jacket pointing a gun at Luke, who was shielding a smaller

kid behind him.

There was no thought beyond getting attention and the *gun* away from the kids, and while Tim started cataloguing observations, his mouth was moving before he had anything even resembling a plan.

"Hey!"

Six of them, all wearing the same weird skull t-shirts surrounding a couple of kids. Bullet hole in the teeter totter looked fresh, a warning shot? Redbird was nowhere to be seen, and the kid behind Luke had a bruised cheek, at least a few hours old.

Every head turned towards him.

"There are so many stupid jokes about a bunch of morons bullying a couple of kids I'm not even going to start. You've got five seconds to *back the hell up* before we see how many of your bones I can break in half a minute."

Jacket asshole sneered. "Oh yeah, I'm so scared of the guy in the pokemon pj's."

His friends snickered, and it made Tim want to test the tensile strength of their jaws.

First concern was the gun. The other guys didn't seem to have firearms, though he caught the glint of steel which he'd need to watch out for.

Pockets, something to throw- why did Tim only have a plastic spoon in his pocket? That wasn't exactly an ideal throwing weapon.

Fine. Five seconds was up, and Tim had no patience today. He'd make it work.

His shoes were slip-on, so Tim took a step forward and stepped on his own heel. The gun swung in his direction, and while he was pretty sure this guy was a shit enough shot he could dodge, he wouldn't take any chances with the kids so close by.

A sharp kick flung the shoe into Jacket Asshole's hand knocking the gun out of his grip and giving Tim the time to close the distance. He kept low, just in case, and surged upwards into Asshole's jaw and *oh* the crack he got was satisfying.

Not the end though.

Asshole tried to swing and Tim ducked around him, putting himself in front of the kids and giving him a lovely opening to kick out his knees and then drive a heel into the back of his head. Then it was eyes up, and ignoring the way the world spun.

This was a lot of guys to take without a weapon. So, creativity. Tim snapped the end off his spoon, leaving him with a piece of splintered sharp plastic, and herded the kids towards the new opening so graciously left by Asshole.

"Luke, the place we were talking about the other night; take the kid and go!" He didn't look to see if Luke nodded, but the sound of sneakers on asphalt was good enough for him.

One of Asshole's friends made to follow, but Tim sidled in front of him. "Come on now, we haven't even gotten acquainted yet. Don't go running off on me just yet."

And that was a knife, swinging at his head. Very friendly. Tim ducked and nearly keeled over at what that did to his balance, so he grounded himself by driving his makeshift shiv into the guy's leg and using it as a pivot point to throw the guy over his shoulder as he stood. The *thunk* from behind him was gratifying, even as it meant he needed to *move* or risk being surrounded.

The girl in front of him couldn't have been more than twenty-five, but she clearly knew her way around a street-brawl, surging forwards with a feint that Tim nearly stumbled into despite seeing coming. As it was, his dodge cost him his footing and he turned the slip into a sweeping kick that another guy tried to stomp on.

Already, Tim was out of breath and his chest ached. He didn't have the stamina to do this clean and professional. Quick and dirty would have to do.

Fists, elbows, knees. Back to the basics. Tim worked his way back outside the grouping with a flurry of blows to the girl that left her looking as dazed as he felt and earned him a knick to his ear.

The sting was another grounding point.

It was her fallen knife he scooped up to block the next blade swinging for his head, but it was his knuckles that met the offender’s throat, and his foot to another’s hip that spun them away while he went for the KO. An axe-kick past the hands clutching at their throat to give that extra *bounce* into the ground.

One of them was making a break after the kids, and that was something Tim would *not* allow. But hey, a knife was a much better throwing weapon than a spoon. Tim took the extra time to steady his hand, just to be certain that the knife buried itself in the back of the runner's knee. They went down with a scream.

The two remaining thugs tried to pincer him; one left and going high, the other right and going low. Only one had a knife, so he took the punch to his gut to avoid the blade in the eye, and used the momentum to slam the top of his head into Knife Girl's cheekbone. He could feel it give, and her cry and flinch gave Tim some space to bite back the blackness at the edge of his own vision.

Her friend with the fists took advantage of his stun to hit him again, twice, before Tim's guard twitched back into place and then it was redirecting the blows behind him just in time to disrupt Knife Girl's regroup. Knee to the crotch and up swing of an elbow with a downwards hammer to send him to the ground.

Pivot. Assess.

Various levels of movement, but nothing that seemed likely to cause a problem. The only one who even looked like they'd be going anywhere, funnily enough, was the guy still trying to crawl despite the knife in his leg.

Was denim dragging across asphalt accompanied by little whimpers the sound of an informant? Well in this case Tim thought it just might be.

"Hey buddy," Tim called. The guy flinched into himself and scrambled for a better grip as he tried to move faster. "Any chance you'll play nice and tell me what, exactly, a bunch of losers was doing harassing a couple of kids?"

No response beyond the little sad sounds increasing in volume. Tim carefully makes his way over, wouldn't do to trip now, and comes to a stop in front of him. "I'm talking to you. Who the fuck pulls a gun on a ten year old?"

An unintelligible mutter.

"Come on, speak up." Tim gently placed one foot on top of a grasping hand and shifted his weight forward. "You were plenty brave earlier, what with your five armed friends against a couple of elementary students."

"We were just supposed to pick up the girl and that brat was getting in the way!" the man finally snapped, glaring up at Tim. It was more sad than intimidating. Points for tenacity, though.

Now they were getting somewhere. Tim leaned a little harder, twisting his foot just a touch. "Who were you picking her up for?"

"Some guy! Fuck man I dunno, he had some money and wanted the kid brought to an apartment over in the Bowery. That's all. It's just a job, man!"

Only a little more convincing was needed to get the address, and a little threatening about just how inadvisable it would be to follow him, and Tim was off.

He had a couple of kids, and hopefully a dog, to retrieve.

Chapter End Notes

Hey I managed to finish this before the end of the month! Once again, thanks to all the stuff I wanted to avoid by working on this instead. Also to Replacement Robin for all the wonderful support. (Also also I've only half-edited so I'll probably tweak some things later?)

Tim is legally not allowed a break, sorry guys. And fighting people while sick sucks, but he is Doing His Best, and they suck anyways. I didn't mean for Tim and Bruce to interact, but Bruce was WorryingTM and his Sad Orphan radar went off, and at that point it was out of my hands. But will he remember this weird little encounter? Only time will tell!

Thanks for all the patience and taking the time to read this! If you enjoy I'd love to hear about it but I also take positive vibes. Have a great day!!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While Tim had seven different locations scoped out thus far, the only one he had started work on was an old bungalow with water damage three quarters of the way up the wall and some structural issues in some load-bearing beams. Thus far he had gotten around to making sure nothing would collapse, but it wasn't passing any health inspections any time soon.

Luke and Jason had been helping with the construction, with *very* careful supervision. It usually ended up being one of them playing with Redbird while the other worked on clearing out rotted drywall or something similar. Things that were helpful, but safe for a couple of malnourished kids.

Unfortunately, that hadn't been the location he had discussed with Luke over dinner. Instead, they had argued over whether or not an abandoned bodega could be easily converted into a safehouse. The answer they had come to was probably not. Hopefully, Luke knew the way there from here. If he had gotten lost that would make Tim's job several times harder.

Hell, Tim wasn't entirely sure the best route there. Not through the fog in his head, anyways. The longer it took him to find them, the longer that kid would be scared, so there was no excuse for wasting time.

There was also the matter of where Redbird had run off to, probably spooked by the gunshot. She couldn't exactly have gotten far, but she was more than small enough to fit into an awful lot of hiding spots and if Tim had to get on his knees to start checking under bins he would probably cry. He could try calling her, if he didn't mind letting everyone nearby know his exact location.

It was probably worth it, unless the gang of idiots had friends who wanted to watch them get their asses kicked before stepping in. Possible, since Gothamites were known for being kind of douchey, but unlikely enough. Final answer; probably worth seeing if Redbird would come running to her name.

Yelling hurt, yelling hurt *a lot,* and left him doubled over and coughing into his knees. *Fuck* , his chest burned. But it was worth it to come back to himself with a little distinct head bumping at his knees.

"Hello, beautiful." Tim murmured, fingers twitching for fur but not dumb enough to drop down when he wasn't sure he would be able to stand up again. "Wanna help me go find our boy? He's got a little kid with him, and I'm worried about them."

She looked up at him with soft eyes and quietly *woofed* her agreement. What a good girl.

A little less alone now, Tim put aside the aches and shakes, and turned back to the street. Work to do.

Tim wouldn't be able to pick a single face he passed out of a line-up, later, but he was still sharp enough to pick up intent. He ducked into and out of alleys, avoiding people with a sharpened desperation in their shoulders and eyes. No need to give them what they would see as an easy target. And no need to get into more fights than were absolutely necessary. Mindfulness training meant Tim could practically feel his fever slowly ticking hotter as the world around him slipped further out of focus. It would be disconcerting if he had the presence of mind to be worried about that kind of thing. As it was, Tim was running the odds on Luke successfully getting to the bodega.

Luke was sneaky, and it was the middle of the afternoon. People were less likely to out and out jump a couple of kids in broad daylight. Unless whoever had sent those morons after the kid had more people looking, Tim had faith Luke would get them there safely.

Of course, he had to jinx it.

At least this time there wasn't a gunshot, just shouting.

Tim picked up his pace again, and tore around the corner to see Luke and the kid *once again* being accosted by a group of people, only this time they weren't alone.

"Who the fuck do you think you are trying to snatch a couple of kids off the goddamn street, you fucking pedo pieces of shit? Get the hell out of here before I rip off your dicks and show you the *real* meaning of 'go fuck yourselves!'"

Well it was good to know Jason had always been like that, and the language wasn't an unexpected by-product of the Pit. Also, holy shit, Tiny Jay. There wasn't enough soap in the *world* for that.

The goons weren't even really trying to engage, instead doing their damnedest to stay out of range of Jason's tire iron while trapping the two older children and isolating the small girl. It wasn't going well, since she had latched onto Luke's shirt and was holding on for dear life.

Tim wasn't going to turn down the element of surprise when it was handed to him on a silver platter, so he poured on the speed (*thank you* , soft rubber soles that didn't slap against concrete) and jumped.

One elbow wrapped around the throat of the guy to his right, and his calves locked around the one to his left, and with Tim *torqued* his torso, abs burning, to throw them both to the ground hard. Release in time to land on his feet, and then punch the closest goon in the solar plexus before he even knew what was happening.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tim saw Jason recover surprisingly quickly from a slack-jawed "Holy shit," to use the momentary shock to break the wrist of the sneaky creep reaching for Luke and his little companion.

Bless his violent little heart.

With one unconscious, two rolling around on the ground trying to remember how to breath, and one clutching his arms to his chest and cursing up a storm, that left only one moron standing who seemed to realize he was very suddenly outnumbered. He made to run, as if that was going to fly, but managed only two steps before tripping over Redbird.

She really was the best girl.

Tim strolled over, hiding the hitch in his step, and pausing beside his head.

"Let me guess; some guy hired you to take the kid back to some place in the Bowery, and no you don't know anymore because it's, quote, 'just a job, man.'" It wasn't intentional that his enunciation sharpened a touch, but the fear on the man's face ratcheted up a notch at the prospect that, just maybe, he had pissed the wrong person off. Someone more dangerous than a protective older sibling.

Jason cautiously approached, even as Redbird bounced over to Luke.

The tire iron was hefted and ready to go.

The man's eyes darted frantically between them, and he squeaked out what could generously be called a 'yes.' Tim was sore, exhausted, and not inclined to feeling overly generous right now. He held out an open hand to Jason.

A pause, in which Tim didn't look away from the very stupid man on the ground despite feeling Jason's gaze turn to him. Evaluating.

Cold metal pressed into his palm, warmed slightly in places from small fingers.

The iron wasn't quite long enough to do this standing up, so Tim dropped into a crouch and pressed the flat edge up under the man's chin and tilted his head into forced eye-contact. "Sorry, what was that? I'm not feeling great so you'll have to forgive some hearing troubles."

"Yes," came again, just as squeaky despite the raised volume.

"So you were willing to go kidnap a young girl on the word of someone you've never met before for what, a hundred dollars?" He pressed a little harder, partly for himself because the crying behind him had only gotten softer rather than stopping, and partly in the hopes it would make Jason stop shaking with rage beside him.

The man looked like he might pass out, or wet himself maybe, but he managed another assenting noise.

No need to go passing around unnecessary concussions, no matter

how stupidly selfish someone was. Tim pressed the iron harder into his throat, cutting off his air and starting a mental countdown. "Maybe you should rethink some of your life choices. It is one thing to be desperate enough to do something stupid, and it is another to be so desperate you're willing to hurt *kids* . Perhaps you should decide if your situation is really that bad just yet."

A brief attempt at struggling was cut off by Jason's foot coming down hard enough to break a couple of fingers. A relatively minor injury, and not really one worth admonishing him over. It's not like the guy didn't deserve it.

By the time Tim's count hit zero, the man had stopped twitching and Jason had returned to Luke's side.

Tim followed, at a distance, and stopped about six feet back. Sometime during his impromptu teaching moment, the two men who had been struggling for breath had picked themselves up and made a run for it. Tim watched them go, and very carefully set aside the desire to go after them. He couldn't run for that long right now. Even just standing still, he could feel the knot of yet another coughing fit twisting tighter and tighter with every breath.

"Is he dead?"

The words were so very small, smaller, even, than the tiny girl they came from, and they were like a weeping wound in Tim's chest.

"No, just unconscious. Do you have anywhere safe you can go, somewhere these people won't be able to find you?" He kept his voice soft, and his hands firmly down, half-wishing he could set down the tire iron without probably startling her further.

His efforts were largely in vain, the girl's sobbing picking up volume again as she buried her face in Luke's shoulder.

"That's okay, there are a couple of places we know you can go to, if you're willing to trust us. Would you like to stay with adults, or would you prefer just kids?" Tim didn't have anything up to any kind of safety standard for kids, but he could put them up in his apartment, and crash in one of the half-finished safe houses. It would depend on whether the girl wanted the security of an adult or whether she couldn't trust even that far.

Something about his words was enough to get her to peak up at him, a big doe eye catching his and tear tracks shiny against her dark skin. "You won't take me back to the scary people?"

Tim let his knee hit the concrete and did his best to hold her gaze. "I'll do everything in my power to make sure you never have to see them again. My name is Alvin, that's Luke holding you, and Jason who saved you both. We'd like to help you, if you'll let us."

She didn't let go of Luke, and she didn't stop crying, but the little girl fully faced him and hiccoughed. "Please."

--

Tim took them back to his apartment, leaving the door open while he went across the hall to ask Maggie to keep an eye on them and make sure they ate something because he had some business he needed to sort out. She got a look in her eye like she was ready to fight him on that, but Maggie held in whatever comment on his appearance she so clearly wanted to make when she caught sight of Luke gently introducing the little girl to Redbird.

"You have two hours. And you had better come back in one piece."

“I’m just going to pick up some meds and have a conversation with a couple of people.” Tim tried a grin that only hurt in theory. “Nothing to be concerned about.”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “Meds and conversation, huh? In my day you lot at least tried to be subtle.”

“I have no idea what you mean, Maggie,” he said. “Two hours, I’ll be back. I promise.”

He left her locking her door and crossing the hall, muttering all the while about foolish young men getting in over their heads and refusing to get real jobs. Whatever that meant.

In the meantime, there was a pharmacy a couple of blocks over that he could get his antibiotics from and then he could go on to *discuss* the downsides of trying to kidnap children to a few people. Really, he was just being a good samaritan by explaining to them what kind of things happen to people who think those kinds of things are a good idea.

Tim only half-paid attention to his route to the pharmacy, feeling fairly secure in the late afternoon sun. Two hours from now that might be a different story, but for now he could let his mind play with ideas on what exactly he was going to find at the address he got from the thugs. Off the top of his head, Tim was fairly certain it was an apartment building with a corner store attached, but given the occasional changes to infrastructure so far, he couldn’t be entirely certain it would be as he remembered it.

First though, antibiotics so he could get over this stupid infection as quickly as possible. A little bell announced his entrance and the tech behind the counter caught his eye over the shelves.

He had actually picked up this prescription before, so he was unsurprised by the thirty dollar price tag on a couple weeks course of medication, and he patiently endured the reminder to finish the entire thing even if he started feeling better. The techs gave it every time, but at least this one had the excuse of never having seen him before.

Just as the tech stapled shut his little paper bag (a waste since he was going to take one straight and then put the bottle in his pocket), the door jingled open behind him, and he caught the tear-streaked face of a woman, about twenty-four if he had to guess, out of the corner of his eye.

Manners, or investigation? Be polite, or be a detective?

Tim decided on a happy medium and stepped aside to begin perusing the variety of cough syrups on display, definitely not eavesdropping on the women at the counter.

“Suchi, it’s good to see you again. I know you ration it to make it last longer, but after a couple of extra weeks without you coming in I start to worry that finally backfired,” the technician said, probably a little louder than she meant to be.

A sniff and wiped tears. “I’m managing. Got evicted and was stuck trying to find anyone willing to buy everything I was able to carry out of there. At least I haven’t been eating enough to need much insulin anyways.”

The tech passed across a tissue and glanced briefly at Tim, who tried to look very interested in the ingredients on a bottle of artificial cherry medicine. “It’s not much, but the bed I share with my daughter is a queen, we can probably fit you in if you need somewhere to stay. Or we can try and make something soft work in the kitchen if you’d prefer a little privacy.”

“Thank you. I promise it won’t be for long, and I’ll pay for groceries I swear. I just need a little time to pay off some debts and then I can deal with everything else.” Suchi said, biting back more tears.

“It’s no trouble,” the tech smiled softly. Tim got the feeling he was intruding on something. “I know how hard you work, and it’s not your fault your medication is so expensive. I’ll go grab it, you just take a break for a second. Lord knows you need one.”

It wasn’t exactly news to Tim, he thought as the tech backed away from the counter and Suchi half-collapsed against it, that trying to pay for necessary medical care ruined a lot of lives in Gotham. However, he didn’t often see the people doing their best to make it work and failing despite themselves; usually it was just the people who turned to crime to pay their bills that he ran into. Sure his antibiotics were relatively cheap, even the ones he needed to take regularly, but a lot of things weren’t, and, like Luke had mentioned earlier, there weren’t any safe and cheaper alternatives. People could shell out hundreds of dollars for what would definitely do its job, or they could try their luck with street products and risk their lives to save a little money.

No wonder so many vulnerable people were trapped in the worst parts of Gotham.

In the back of his head, as he re-read the chemical components of cough syrup for the fifth time, Tim’s gears started turning.

There were plenty of drug smuggling operations across the city, how hard would it be to re-purpose one or two to focus on life-saving drugs rather than amphetamines? It’s not like there wasn’t a market for them, and it was actually more rational *not* to cut them with anything addictive because loyalty would come just as easily from efficacy as from chemical dependence. These people were already dependent on one thing, and already desperate. No need for any of the grooming drug dealers usually had to do to keep clients. All they would need to

do would be to offer their product below market rates, and people would come.

It would save lives, creating a safe and affordable alternative, and potentially forcing the more dangerous competitors selling tainted product to either clean up their act or sidle more firmly into the illegal drug industry.

The bell chimed again, and a middle-aged man with a small girl entered the store, breaking Tim's train of thought and reminding him about what other business he had to take care of today. Best to put a pin in anything else until he figured out who exactly were the "scary people" the little lady in his apartment was afraid of.

And possibly until after a nap of some kind.

Priorities.

Chapter End Notes

A little later than a month, but in my defense I did write a whole separate fic in that time as well! At least I actually finished that one, I say as all my other unfinished and unposted WIPs judge me from my drive. You'd think I'd get more writing done with all this free time, and yet.

Tim can officially add another child to his growing roster, and a whole sidequest to his to-do list. He may never get that nap, the poor bastard. But at least he has medication and something resembling a plan! Probably, at least.

How does everyone feel about his ever growing schemes? I'm having more than a little fun coming up with ways for Tim to try and fix Crime Alley, but I am *definitely* open to suggestions.

Anyways, drop a comment if you feel like it, and I will definitely scream about it quietly. Hope you enjoyed the read, and have a great day!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time he was finally approaching the address those thugs had been generous enough to provide him with, Tim's headache had settled into a spike of pain at the base of his skull. Taking his first does of antibiotics had done nothing to relieve that, but he hadn't really expected it to. Those would need some time and another couple of doses to really start working. Tim could manage until then.

His memory had been right; the little corner store he remembered lit up drew his eye first. Whether it was the same one from years in the future, he wasn't actually sure, but it didn't really matter. What did matter was deciding if he was going to approach this like a concerned citizen, or an angry vigilante. Front door, or window.

In the end, a coughing fit decided for him. Climbing even two stories up the side of a building wasn't a good idea right now, not when he couldn't be sure he wouldn't lose his grip and fall. So to the stairs it was.

The door to the foyer was locked, presumably to try and minimize break-ins and keep non-tenants out, but the lock was cheap enough Tim could jiggle it open with a pick without much effort. It mostly just looked like he was wrestling with a sticky key. Idly, Tim reminded himself to look into upgrading his building's locks into something better than these glorified latches. Sure a good enough criminal could pick most things, but these weren't even a deterrent, just an illusion of security.

Bruce had drilled into his head that a bad lock was oftentimes more dangerous than no lock at all.

Tim was absolutely not winded by the two flights of stairs, he was just a little wheezy because his lungs were trying to quit on him. He would not be held responsible for a bodily mutiny, he *wouldn't* .

As it was, Tim took an extra moment to assess the door he stopped in front of. Old wood, paint peeling at the edges of the frame, stained brass knob. Not a whole lot of effort had gone into upkeep here, that was for sure. It didn't look like there were any extra security measures around it, but the door swung inward, which meant plenty of opportunity for nasty surprises hidden where he couldn't see them. So it was time for a classic maneuver to get inside: blatant and suspiciously friendly lies.

He knocked. "Hello? I think I got some of your mail, but honestly the numbers on this thing are hard to read, so I was hoping you could just confirm you know this sending address? It looks like it's some kind of nursing home or something."

Calculated gamble; no way anyone living in the Bowery could afford to put someone in long-term care, *unless* they were only in the Bowery for the cover it provided for criminal activities. People who could afford to send multiple groups out after one kidnapped little girl wouldn't live in a place like this.

Approaching footsteps had Tim shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet. If this turned into a fight, between the enclosed space and his various achy joints, it was going to be a brutal one.

A brief pause; whoever it was looking through the peephole, probably. Too bad for them Tim could tell the glass was cloudy and out of alignment, meaning his image would be blurry and warped. No way they could see his hands and the damning lack of a letter there. The click of a lock sliding out of place, and the rattle of a chain. Three, two, one-

"You don't fucking live here. Who the hell are you?" The man glared at him, eyes bloodshot and wet. Jaundiced lips peeled off of yellow teeth. "And you don't have no fucking letter."

From deeper inside the apartment, Tim heard a hgh stifled sob, as if someone very young was trying to stay quiet. The ache in his chest froze over. On an unbidden impulse, Tim thumbed a button on his belt that started an audio recording.

Tim grinned up at the man, tilting his head the inch needed to look him in the eye. "No I certainly do not. But I bet you don't have a good reason to be kidnapping little girls off the streets either, so I guess neither of us are saints."

"Fucking 'scuse me?" he snarled, hands balling into fists and making an attempt to loom. As if that was going to make Tim back down when he could see the minute twitch of his head to one of the doors Tim could just see past him.

Didn't take a genius to guess what was behind it.

"You can either release whatever poor kid you've got stuffed away, and I'll only drop evidence of your drug dealing off at the 53rd precinct; you know, the one who's captain lost a sister to some sex slavers when she was a kid? Or, if you want to be difficult about this, I can break both your wrists and your collarbone, and then go tip off the cops to your whole human trafficking gig as well. Your call." Tim was bluffing. Sure he was pretty sure this guy was guilty (recent smoke damage on the ceiling with colouration suggesting weed, tell-tale powder in between the tiles, and not-at-all suspicious lengths of rubber hose on the counter, but only signs of alcohol abuse on the man himself suggesting he was using other's addictions to feed his own and letting them use here), however at this point he had basically no evidence, and no Gotham cop was coming anywhere near the Bowery for a nobody drug dealer on hearsay. The human trafficking angle might get a police presence, if he could back it up with

something resembling evidence, but right now all he had was the girl at his apartment, and there was no way in hell he would ask her to talk to the cops if she didn't want to.

Especially when it wasn't her word he was going off of, pulling his conclusions from the sparse furniture of what Tim could see (an apartment for business in other people's pleasure, not a place of residence), and the amount of money he suspected was involved in this particular operation. Circumstantial, all of it. Enough for a vigilante to act on, but worthless to a cop. Unless Tim could get an admission.

The question was, did this guy know all of that?

Based on the way his eyes widened and the pulse in his forehead picked up, the answer was a resounding no.

"You can't fucking prove shit. You know what people do to snitches around here, punk? I can make sure you fucking find out," he spat. Close, but this wasn't horseshoes.

Tim laughed at him, baldfaced and bold. Distantly, he felt the action tearing at his chest, but he pushed that down as a Later Tim problem. Right now, he had a role to play. "People don't like snitches, but they like pedophiles even less, you fucking creep. I'm sure I can get people to forgive the snitching just this once. Hell, I think the real complaint I'll get is that I didn't just kill you myself."

"You piece of shit. What if I just kill you now, or break your legs and hold onto you while I find a buyer, huh? Cheekbones and eyes like that, someone'll pay a pretty penny for you, I'm sure." Usable, but Tim was sure they could do better.

“I dunno, I think I’m a little too old for most of your contacts. Might take a while, and somehow I doubt you’ll be able to cut a deal with any kind of efficiency.” The shit-eating grin was critical, big and shiny and in his face, but so was the casual dismissal. *Look at me, look how I don’t respect you, tell me why I should;* a great big dangling lure.

And the ugly, wonderful, *easy* idiot bit.

“Smugass little fucking *shit* , you don’t know a thing about who you’re fucking with!” he shouted, all bruised ego and fragile masculinity. “I’ve got a dozen guys bringing me pretty street rats and hobos, and by no fucking means are you the oldest I’ve ever sold. I can get you out of the city in thirty six hours flat, and it’ll be the worst fucking hell I can find because *no one* comes and fucking threatens me!”

Yet another thank you to Gothamite arrogance. Every time, like a charm.

Although the laugh bubbling in his chest this time would have been more genuine, Tim shoved his triumph down. There was still a crying child that needed his help. “No, see I think *you’re* the one with no idea what you’re fucking with. And I’m losing my patience. Get out of my way before voluntary movement stops being an option.”

For a beat, then two, Tim thought he had pulled it off and that the trafficking asshole was going to back down. As if his life could be that easy.

Instead of stepping away from the door, the man took an aggressive step forward, hand reaching behind him for what Tim would put money on being a gun.

Nope, nope, nippity nope. Tim’s head hurt too much to do this. Tim

lashed out fast, starting with a high kick at the man's collarbone- he had made a promise after all- and smacking the gun to the floor as he brought his foot down. He took the opening to get closer.

Except that was a mistake. The man may have stumbled with the blow, but his free hand snapped out too quickly for Tim's black-edged vision to really track. His fist connected with the side of Tim's head, driving him back into the hallway.

Tim's guard came back up, but he wasn't confident in its ability to take hits. At least that thought was accurate; the follow up of blows rained against his arms and smashed through.

One, two, too many to count with his head spinning like a top. There were words being spat against him, but Tim couldn't care less. He couldn't breathe and he couldn't focus, all he could do was brace himself against the hall wall and try to stay on his feet.

His knee gave out, and Tim dropped with it, just thankful to be out of reach. Not for long, the man reaching down to grab at his shoulders (*didn't go for a kick, no combat training*), but Tim locked his hands around his wrists, straining to push him back. Gravity wasn't on his side, so he had to even it out. Tim dug his thumbs into tendons, and twisted his body with bruising force to the ground, snapping one with the sharp change in angle and force, and cracking the other into the wall.

This particular move also had the disadvantage of bringing down the man's weight against him, though he seemed a little busy screaming to resume punching Tim.

A door slightly down the hallway opened up, but Tim couldn't see whoever it was that looked. Whoever it was didn't say a word and closed the door moments later.

Tim heaved his way free, arms shaking. He allowed himself a count of two before pushing himself to his feet and turning his attention again to the task at hand. The man on the ground curled closer to the wall, quieter now. After a moment of consideration, Tim kicked him once in the head, hard enough to daze but not enough that it ought to be a serious injury.

Fuck, Tim didn't even know his name.

This whole intimidating-people-without-information thing would be so much easier if he had the bulk to back it up. No one ever took his physical threats seriously until after they'd seen him put someone face-first into the floor. Maybe he needed to start carrying a flashier weapon, since this was apparently becoming a habit.

That or he actually needed to start rebuilding his admittedly kind of stalker-y dossiers on Gotham's population.

Both would probably be safest. Contingencies, and all that.

From inside the apartment, another soft sob echoed into the hall. The kid.

Tim made his way slowly into the apartment, scooping up the handgun, unloading it, and tucking it into his hoodie, and called out, "Hello? I'm not here to hurt you. The man who was is currently occupied, and I'd like to get you out of here, if you'll let me."

A sniffle came from behind the door the asshole had been dumb enough to implicate earlier. Tim was careful not to approach it too quietly, and rapped gently.

“My name is Alvin, I found this place helping another little girl. Right now she’s with my neighbour, an old lady named Maggie who thinks I’m an idiot, and a couple of kids who hang around my apartment sometimes and I can’t get them to leave. Jason and Luke. Would you like to come meet them? We don’t have dinner plans yet as far as I know, but since I’m pretty sure they’re staying to eat, we can make sure there’s enough for you too.”

The door cracked open, just enough to make out a suspicious eye squinting at him. “How do I know you’re not just lying to get me to come with you?”

Tim allowed himself to shrug. “I’d offer to call the apartment, but I don’t have a landline and I have no idea if Maggie has one. I could call the police here, and you could go with them instead, if you’d prefer, but the jerk isn’t going to stay down for much longer and we should both at least leave the building.”

While she was making up her mind, Tim snapped a few pictures of the apartment living room. He needed as much evidence as he could get if he wanted this guy actually arrested, and Tim doubted his injuries alone would stop him from trying to hurt people.

At this point, managing scared and skeptical children was becoming old hat, so it only took a little more negotiation (Tim promised cookies he was fairly confident were still hidden in his bedroom) and a carefully non-threatening demeanour to convince the small girl to come out. She looked similar enough to the one back at Tim’s place that he suspected they may be sisters, though she was maybe thirteen to the other girl’s eight. He hoped their parents were dead or out of their minds with worry, because the most obvious alternative left a thick, tar-like taste in his mouth.

The little girl introduced herself as Marianne, and refused to touch

Tim until she saw the fallen figure in the hall, and then she was clinging to the hem of his hoodie and refused to let go. She was incredibly patient when, half a block away, Tim collapsed against a wall in a coughing fit, and didn't say a word.

She also didn't let go of him, just shifted her grip to help hold him up instead.

Walking through Gotham at sundown wasn't ideal, far from it, but they didn't have a choice. Tim could only imagine what inviting targets they made, a couple of small figures and one clearly sick, and it left him antsy and on edge until they were in sight of his building. Even then he didn't relax, just pointed it out and picked up the pace. Marianne was clearly tiring, probably hadn't really eaten or slept in at least a few days, but she followed doggedly with a stubborn set to her shoulders.

On the stairwell Tim was forced to stop again, but he could just about make out voices he was certain were Jason and Luke, as well as a quieter one that must be their guest, and he tried to communicate that to Marianne using a series of gestures. Whether she understood them or not, she stayed by his side until he unbent and dragged himself up the last flight.

Sure enough, the door to his apartment was open, as was Maggie's and it sounded like everyone was in his living room. The girl was definitely talking, though it sounded like it was mostly directed at Redbird, and at the sound of her voice Marianne finally broke away from Tim and sprinted down the hall.

Tim was glad his guess about them being related had been right, but he was less glad to be suddenly abandoned and he was forced to catch himself with one hand as his legs tried to shake out from under him. The combination of his infection, his relatively minor injuries, and the post-fight adrenaline crash was as effective as a bat to the knees.

His head hurt. His chest hurt. Hell, he could feel his heartbeat in his *eyes* and it was honestly unsettling.

He tried to focus, he just needed to get into his apartment and he could pass out in his own bed, but he felt like one giant, pulsing bruise, and just the idea of standing up again ached.

Squeezing his eyes shut didn't help anything, but at least it stopped the ground from swimming around under him. Sort of.

Just so he could catch his breath.

Except when he opened his eyes the blackness only partially pulled back and the fist in his chest curled tighter. He hacked into the floor, hard enough to gag and tear at his throat, but at least it got some of the fluid out of his lungs. Not enough, though.

Distantly, he heard shouting from down the hall, but what cut through his daze was the scrape of a tongue against his cheek, which was quickly followed by hands on his shoulders. They were small, but there was a lot of them, too many to really keep track of, and they helped tip him back onto his heels.

More voices, quieter this time, and a gentle touch across his stinging face, and then Tim was being dragged back to his feet despite his whine of protest. Movement, blurred and painful, that seemed to last an age, until his supports shifted around and then lowered him onto something wonderfully soft. It smelt just a little bit like fur and cheap detergent. A warm weight settled onto his stomach, and the hands and voices receded.

It still burned to breathe, and Tim couldn’t move much even if he wanted to, but maybe it would be okay, just this once, to let himself sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who has two thumbs and did a bunch of writing but none of it complete and almost none of it for this fic? This gal!!

That's actually a lie, this chapter is finished, but with four active WIPs open in my mentally labelled "Work Window" let alone all of the dormant ones, it sure feels that way sometimes. It's nice to have gotten this done though, and while the last section is barely edited, I'll come back to it again later for Actual Editing. That'll be sometime when I'm not in the middle of moving, hopefully.

But on this chapter! I meant for Tim to not get in a fight, but the guy was just so fighty and Tim has negative patience right now. Hopefully this doesn't read as too much like the last chapter, since even I got that vibe writing it. Hey though, he's finally taking a nap, so that's something. And maybe I'll actually be able to do another time skip soon (and use that Christmas section I started back in November :p), though somehow I seriously doubt it.

Thanks all for reading and the continued support, it really means a lot to me!! I hope you're all doing well and staying safe, and that you all have a wonderful week <3

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was dark.

That was the first thing that Tim registered in… who knew how long. There was a lot of dark haze and warmth-that-bordered-on-too-much. Sometimes there was moisture, on his head or in his mouth. Sometimes there was an aching pulse that rippled through his whole body.

But mostly it was just dark.

That was okay, though. What little awareness Tim had doubted he could handle much more than the heat, the damp, the dark.

Eventually, the real world started to poke back in. Voices, swimming in and out of focus. Light, soft and steady turning his little world red.

Pain. Dull and old; the feeling of yellowing bruises and post-cast stiffness.

“He’s going to owe us *so* much pizza.” Young, anxious, familiar?

A snort, another voice. “Pizza is all well and good, but I want an actual *meal* . With food from a real grocery store. There had better be at least two vegetables.”

Laughter, higher; very young boy or female? “You know you’ve got it bad when you start daydreaming about broccoli.”

More laughter, warm and happy though edged with a tiredness that triggered a spark of guilt. They shouldn’t be tired, it was his job to make sure they didn’t have to be.

That reminder, of purpose and responsibility, cut through the remaining softness holding Tim gently back from awareness, and he couldn’t help but groan as he forced his eyes open through the pain.

Still dark, but less. No window, light coming through an open doorway. He was in bed. He ached in a way that was unpleasantly reminiscent of the cold he had caught while searching for Bruce in Europe. Foreign bacteria could be nasty. Sure he hadn’t let it stop him, but he probably should have. Especially after his third near-miss with his grapple.

Now, though, Tim was more cautious with himself. Those voices, the kids, he had promised them safety. He couldn’t afford to take himself out through negligence, not when they were just starting to rely on him.

It took more effort than he’d like to admit to get his hands underneath him, but Tim managed to shakily prop himself upright on the third try. Once there, he took a well-deserved break and focused on steadying his breathing without crossing the line into the coughing fit he could feel lurking just on the horizon.

Future Tim problems.

Tim allowed himself a hundred count before he shoved his legs over the edge of the mattress, and forced himself to his feet. He took stock.

Sore, everywhere; a sharp tightness in his lungs; points of acute tenderness scattered across his body, presumably from the scraps he had gotten in; foggy and thick thoughts. All manageable, if inconvenient. The real sticking point was the trembling he couldn't stop. It'd be fine, he just wouldn't get into any more fights until he wasn't shaking so hard.

Feeling unfairly like a baby deer, Tim carefully picked his way toward the kids; voices and into the main room of his apartment. All conversation stopped when a brief stumble had him catching himself on the wall.

"Morning, chipmunks," Tim croaked even as he tried to leverage himself further upright.

"Alvin!" Luke was fastest to respond, barreling forward to latch onto his elbow, but Jason was quick to follow, and even the girls approached cautiously.

"Should you even be up and walking?" Jason asked, not quite touching, but with hands at the ready to catch or stabilize. "You've been out for over twenty-four hours."

That wasn't surprising, though Tim did feel a pang of guilt for leaving them all alone for so long. He also felt the need to do inventory to make sure no one had stolen something while he was unconscious. They were good kids, but good kids in terrible situations with sticky fingers.

"Sorry about that. I had been planning on taking it easy until my garbage immune system got back in gear, but something came up," Tim grimaced. "Have you all eaten?"

Apparently his question and blatant discomfort were enough for Luke to nod emphatically, and for the little girl, Layla she loudly introduced herself, to start rambling about the stew Maggie had made for them from the 'abysmal selection of produce' in Tim's cupboards (she said that in an impression of the old woman that turned the inside of Tim's chest warm and goopy), and the apple slices that had been breakfast, and the sandwiches for lunch, and, and, and.

Marianne was staring at him. He was doing his best to ignore that without ignoring *her* , but it was more than a little unnerving. When she finally spoke, her voice was stiff and edged, like she was bracing for a blow. "Chipmunks?"

"You know, cause I'm Alvin," Tim gestured vaguely between himself and the assorted hooligans filling his home. "Therefore there must be chipmunks. And look, here you are."

Jason snorted. "Pretty sure that's not how that works. Isn't Alvin supposed to be one of the chipmunks? And a singer?"

"Creative license," Tim shrugged, and gave his apartment a quick, assessing once over. And sure enough, one of the novelty plastic cups was gone from its usual place next to the tap. Called it. "Anyways, I believe I promised Marianne cookies, so I'm just going to grab those and the folder of what we've been working on, and if whoever decided to *borrow* the Scooby-Doo cup would be so kind as to put it back, I might be inclined to share with everyone."

Taking pity on them, Tim pretended not to hear the scramble of motion behind him as he carefully made his way back into his room to rescue the cookies from where he'd tucked them in sealed tupperware in a hole in his closet wall and the folder from the perilous stack of papers next to his bed. Walking was still a chore, but every step helped him pinpoint what exactly he was compensating for at the moment. He still couldn't wait to sit down.

Thankfully, no one was sitting in his technically-unofficial seat at the kitchen table, so he collapsed with all of the grace he could be bothered with, which was to say, none at all.

The kids descended on the cookies like a pack of tiny raptors; with a vicious and strategic cunning that divided them up by some ineffable system of value until everyone had a pile in front of them. Jason had a handful, Luke a few more, Marianne had about the same as Jason, and Layla had the most of them all, though Luke was eyeing her pile like he was looking to change that. It wouldn't be easy, with how closely Marianne was guarding both of their shares, but if he recruited Jason to the effort it might be manageable.

They were unfairly adorable.

While they managed their politics, Tim carefully laid out the relevant papers on the three in-progress safe houses, and the four prospective ones. His fingers itched for his computer so he could start falsifying the paper trails he'd need to purchase property as soon as he could find the money.

Though he'd have to be careful about budgeting if he was looking to implement both the safe house system and his medical drug smuggling-and-or-production at the same time. Both were very necessary and Tim couldn't really justify prioritizing one over the other. Theoretically, he might be able to eventually use the drugs to fund the safe houses, but that didn't solve the problem of starting capital.

Still. He could worry properly about all that when he was closer to full-capacity. Or could at least walk around the block unassisted.

As the kids slowly worked through their hoards, Tim walked them all through what he had so far and what he was thinking of doing as he moved forward. It was review for Jason and Luke, except for some of the newer hypotheticals, but their attention barely wavered and their belief seemed to swallow the girls into focusing as well. Tim felt a little like he was giving a presentation to a board of directors, except he was actually emotionally invested in not just what decision they made but also in their well-being, which was very different than hoping Mr. Palmer would hurry up and have that “heart-attack” he was planning so he would step down to spend more time traveling and Tim could appoint someone less bullheadedly-cruel in his stead.

It was a welcome change.

Belatedly, Tim realized he had even taken on that smooth, confident, upper class accent he used for WE work. Whoops. Too late now, he supposed. So he wound down and made a point to drop back into something more street-worthy as he made eye contact with each of them. “Any questions?”

“Is this some kind of joke?” Marianne demanded, sharp and suddenly on the offensive. Tim couldn’t really blame her, it was all rather a lot.

Still, he needed her to understand what he was offering them all. “No, it’s not. Sorry about the voice; it’s a bad habit. The trick to selling things to people is often *sounding* right when you do it. Plenty of people start expecting to get scammed the second they hear someone from around here. Sometimes that’s fine, but others you need them as off-guard as possible.”

Marianne still looked skeptical, but Layla seemed fairly convinced and Luke and Jason had only seemed mildly exasperated by his vocal shenanigans. Still, it couldn’t hurt to give them some space to think by going to get something to drink.

So Tim went to stand up, only to immediately be shoved back into his chair by Jason. “Oh absolutely not, old man. You’re staying right there, unless you were planning on going back to bed.”

“I was just going to grab some water,” Tim said, raising his hands in surrender and settling back into his seat as Jason shooed Luke to go fill a mug from the sink and redirected a suddenly sulking Redbird into Layla’s hug-range.While it was kind of cute, the fussing, Tim wasn’t about to let these kids start picking up bad habits about backwards relationships with adults. It was not their responsibility to be his caretakers.

Maybe he could give them some errands to run and they’d calm down? A little bit of agency and activity, topped off with feeling useful, to assuage any discomfort seeing Tim so sick might be causing.

Now, how to swing that without giving away what exactly he was doing?

Start with a joke, play it cool. “You know this isn’t the first time I’ve been sick, right? I don’t need my own team of nurses coddling me.”

Sure enough, Jason glowered at him and Luke scoffed. “If that’s true, why did we find you passed out in a hallway?”

“Extenuating circumstances. Unavoidable, really.” And there was step one, nice and neat. Tim sipped at his water and swallowed his meds. Now the redirect. “All I need to do is sleep, keep taking my meds, and drink a lot of water and I’ll be right as rain in a week or so. The only thing I’m actually concerned about is I promised to check in on a few people in the next few days, and if I don’t things might escalate for them.”

Luke did a stunning impression of Redbird, perking up as he caught the scent of *a job to do* , and Marianne looked intrigued despite herself. There was an edge to Jason that told Tim he likely had some idea what was going on, but also that he was probably going to allow it anyways. Excellent.

"We could do that!" Luke seemed thrilled for a split second, before he visibly stamped down on his reaction and followed it up with feigned indifference. "If you wanted, I mean. Give us something to do that's not babysitting your gross, stupid face."

"An adventure," Layla gasped in delight, taking Marianne's hand and swinging it wildly. "Mari, we've gotta, he helped us, so now we've gotta do his quest!"

Marianne was still skeptical, made worse by her sister's immediate faith. That was a good reaction to keep, all things considered. "What kind of people? Where? And what do you mean by 'escalation'?"

"Nowhere far, mostly just a handful of shop owners around the neighbourhood. They've had some problems with a couple of local gangs that I've been helping out with. I just want to be sure that no one's been giving them trouble."

This seemed to catch Jason's attention, sharpening it into a vaguely uncomfortable point of pressure. Whatever came next was going to be a test of some kind. "And what exactly do you want us to do if there *is* some kind of problem?"

Tim blinked. Was it not obvious…? "I'd want you to come back and let me know so I could do something about it. Or if it was unsafe to get close, I'd rather you didn't try and just came straight back here, though that's what I'd prefer you do any time you think you're in danger. I couldn't, *wouldn't* , ask you to do something you felt was

unsafe. Hell, I'm not even asking you to do this," Not quite a lie; he wasn't asking, but he did want them to. "I was mostly just complaining because I get whiny when I'm sick." Lie; there hadn't been anyone to complain *to* at first, and after that there was always something much more important going on. It was a good lie though. Tim just needed to keep the kids occupied enough they wouldn't fixate on worrying about him. He was the adult; care-taking was his job, not theirs.

"No, no, we could totally do that," Luke waved away his concern frantically. "It's just people like the Vecellios, right?"

Some of the suspicion faded from Marianne's expression (maybe she knew them?), and Jason relaxed again, more so than he usually did whenever he was around the apartment. Apparently Tim had passed whatever test his question had been.

Tim nodded. "Exactly like them. The Ibanescus shouldn't be a problem for anyone around here anymore, but you know Gotham. There's always another bunch of predatory jerks around the corner. I can give you guys some money to pick up pizza while you're over there."

"Oh, they've been giving me free pieces when I drop by, ever since you kicked those guys' asses there," Luke grinned.

They had, had they? Tim would have to see about getting them a thank-you gift of some kind.

"Hey, language!" Mariana snapped, automatically before pausing. Tim could see her replaying Luke's words in her head. "Wait, *this* guy kicked someone's ass? Are you *sure* ?"

That was just rude. "You *saw* a guy who I beat in a fight, why do you

sound so surprised?"

"Well sure you beat *one* guy, but he messed you up pretty bad. Is this a regular thing for you, barely winning fights and then passing out?"

Before Tim could even try to defend himself, Luke started off on a long, kind of confusing tangent about all the times he'd seen "Alvin totally wrecking dicks who had it coming." It was kind of flattering, but did nothing for the headache blooming at the base of Tim's skull.

"Okay, as much as I appreciate you defending my honour, Luke, that's probably enough. To answer your question, Marianne, I don't try to get into fights, but sometimes things come up and I can handle myself well enough that I won't scare easy," Tim said, bracing himself on the table and slowly, *slowly* standing up. He had to wait out the immediate black that tried to swallow his vision, but he was *fine*. "Now, I think I'm going to eat a granola bar and then pass out again if that's alright by you lot."

This was not, technically, a lie. Tim had every intention of eating and sleeping enough to make most cats jealous. He was just also going to see what he could do about tracking down one of Crane's secret labs. Why buy his own chemistry equipment when he could reappropriate some for a better cause? He already had some idea who was responsible for the illegal drugs coming into the city. Assuming he could find the money, it would be straightforward to get them to add some less harmful products to their usual fare. And if he could track down some labs around the city and convince a few workers to switch employers, he might not even need to get them to ship finalized medication, and could just get the necessary compounds.

There was a lot of research he could get done, even if he was going to be stuck in bed for a while.

“Wait, you haven’t told us who you need to check on yet!” Luke objected, fluttering anxiously to Tim’s side.

Right. Errands. Tim rattled off a list of local names, people he saw around regularly even if he didn’t really talk to as many of them as he would have liked. The pizzeria, the pharmacy, a deli, a bodega, a couple of working girls who part-timed at a cafe, one of the garbage men who lived a block down. Little check-ins that gave him a general sense of where the community was at, and if anyone was in specific trouble. Nothing dangerous, not if they stayed together, but certainly enough to keep the four of them busy for the rest of the day.

He sighed, and ran a hand down his face as if that could wipe away the lingering dizziness. “If you’re going to insist on doing this for me, I’d appreciate if you all stayed together. While the specific man who was looking to hurt Marianne and Layla shouldn’t be a problem for the next while, you shouldn’t take any chances. Try to be somewhere safe before dark, please?”

Luke grinned up at him, all big dark eyes and trouble in his grin, and Tim thought about the two extra toothbrushes and the watermelon toothpaste in his bathroom, something quiet and warm and unidentifiable tightening behind his ribs. “We’ll be back before you have the time to miss us, weird guy.”

Tim ruffled his hair, and glanced quickly from Marianne to Jason, each giving a small nod in return. They’d make sure everyone got back safely.

“You’d better be. Who’ll steal all my juice and poptarts otherwise?” Luke batted Tim’s hand away as he spoke, but his smile stayed bright. “Now shoo, and let this perfectly-reasonably-aged man go to bed.”

The kids and dog left his apartment in a tiny stampede, loud enough

he could hear them all the way to the stairwell even through his closed door.

At this point, Tim could forge paperwork in his sleep, so he could work on that in a separate window while he focused on the puzzle of where he was going to be stealing supplies from.

Crane had always had a thing for setting up shop in low-income areas, usually close to the docks where supplies and test subjects were easy to obtain, so if Tim was lucky there might be a site not too far away he could raid. It'd be tricky to pin down anywhere for sure without doing the legwork, but he could probably identify possible locations at the least. And he'd had a few drug rings largely pegged for the last month or so, and had been thinking about stepping in as their territories started to encroach on Tim's little neighbourhood, so maybe he could poach some labour from them. It wouldn't take much for his recon on them to be twisted into blackmail, if it came down to it, after all.

Then there was the ever-looming problem of capital. Sure he could steal the money, goodness knew Cobblepot had it coming, but the issue with stolen money was it needed to *go* somewhere. Tim could set up a hundred shell corporations to wire it through, but if someone was well and truly determined to find where it went, it would always be possible. Especially if they didn't care about following the law to do so. Maybe Tim could falsify invoices for his technical services of varying, non-suspicious amounts? At least until he found a larger source of legitimate income.

And of course he would need some way to launder the money he *did* get from the medicine business since, greater good or not, it wasn't exactly legal…

Hm. There was a lot to get done. Best to get started.

Chapter End Notes

Hey there!! It has been Some Time since I've updated, and I'd like to apologize for that but I have been busy with Many Things (also while I did technically finish JayTim Week, I hated my last two fills so they're just sitting in my drive, taunting me and will likely never leave sorry).

But I'm back with a chapter, and I'm quite fond of it! Still no time-skip, still no Christmas, but lots of scheming and the kids got a change to be more than narrative props! I will admit that my research for these schemes was largely cursory and not at all in-depth, so please suspend your disbelief anywhere you think "wow this author really knows nothing about the actual logistics of organized crime!" because I don't but I Am Doing My Best.

Tim is, of course, back on his bullshit of not sleeping when he should be, but he'll probably pass out again at some point after eating that granola bar, which, as we've established, Totally counts as a nap. Totally.

One of the things I've been busy with is I'm now in a podcast with some friends of mine and I edit the audio, which ends up eating a lot of what used to be Writing Time. It's called the Nerd Crusade, and we upload to youtube every Wednesday! The next episode is a "Who's the Best Robin?" debate, so if you want to hear a brief lecture on Dick Grayson's history, Me Loudly Having Opinions, and some Kind Of Rude But Honest Takes on Jason and Damian, feel free to check it out!
Edit: Here's a link to the channel for anyone interested!
https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCrOHu7DOrXqA0brS6EBlslA

Thanks for all of your patience on this, and thanks as always to Replacement Robin for her endless patience and also Reacting to things in ways that motivates me to write them. I'd love to hear any thoughts on the chapter, the story, or just what your favourite fruit is, so please consider dropping a comment about any or all of that, and I hope you all have a wonderful day!!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The granola bar was less filling than Tim had hoped. It barely put a dent in the gnawing of his gut, but he was equally sure it was all he could safely keep down. And it had certainly been enough to knock out whatever animal instinct had been letting him cling to consciousness, since, according to the last edits he had made to his current research files, he had fallen asleep maybe ten minutes after finishing his snack.

At least he made something resembling progress with the work. His early instinct about the popular coffee shop had apparently been on to something, since, according to some of the deliveries scheduled to it from a variety of chemical companies that had *no* business anywhere near somewhere that was supposed to be in the food industry, there was something going on there that had very little to do with caffeine. If Tim was very lucky, he was correctly picking up some of what would be Crane's favourite red flags, about twelve years from now. If not, there was still bound to be some useful products and equipment to swipe before they could cause any more harm to the Alley's population.

What actually roused Tim from his unscheduled nap, was the clatter of movement at his door. Either someone with a key was struggling to get inside, or a very noisy criminal was trying to break in.

Tim would bet on the former, if he wasn't currently very carefully managing a budget.

Still, he should probably get up from where he had passed out at the table before they got inside and gave him an earful for not being in bed like he had said he would be. Or maybe he could play off his clearly recently woken up appearance to having definitely napped like

he promised, and not the result of his traitorous body refusing to stay awake when he had things to get done. He was a good liar, he could pull this off.

After he got some water so his mouth stopped tasting so much like death, at least.

Carefully leveraging himself to his feet, Tim stood up just in time to nearly get run over by the kids as they finally popped the door open and swarmed his apartment. They were like giant, purposeless ants, all scrambling limbs and rustling cargo. Between them, they had about eight paper bags, though Luke appeared to also be carrying... Mail?

No, there was no way it was mail for any of them; Tim was fairly sure none of them had an actual address at the moment, after all. And while it was possible they had broken into the shitty mailboxes downstairs to pick up his mail for him, Tim couldn't fathom why he would have what looked like six separate letters. He wasn't even certain there were six adults who knew where he *lived* .

"What are you doing out of bed?" Jason glowered at him, setting his four, delicately balanced bags down. Layla and Marianne carefully set their own bags down, Marianne scooping Layla's off the floor to add it to the growing pile on the table.

Tim tried a shrug and a grin, *nothing to see here officer* . "I woke up and wanted to grab some water. Being sick is thirsty work, don't you know." And a redirect. "What's all of that stuff?"

"We stopped in with everyone you asked us to," Luke said, tapping the envelopes against the table to some kind of beat. "The Vecellios gave us some more names that they said we should go talk to for you. We got about one bag per place. Or an envelope, from the places that didn't deal in like. Food and stuff."

... What? Why would people be trying to give him things?

Jason spoke before Tim could ask, all false casual assurance. "Apparently, there's a handful of places around here that heard about your deal with them and wanted in. These are all, quote, 'deposits' belonging to basically every grocery store in a ten block radius, half of the pawn shops, and a decent percentage of the corner stores. You're going to have to go in person to the laundromat on 77th, though. Said they wouldn't agree to anything without meeting you first."

"Would have been easier if you had told us what to say beforehand," Marianne called from the recliner Luke had bullied him into getting where she was snuggled up beside Redbird and Layla.

And once again there were eyes on him, though at least it seemed more curious than anything like judging.

Tim needed to sit down, dry throat be damned. He collapsed back in his chair and in front of his computer. All of the kids but Jason were blocked by the towering bags. Jason, who was still staring at him expectantly. And why wouldn't he, since as far as he knew, he had just been sent out to collect on *protection money*.

There may have been some miscommunication. Apparently.

He had to return this stuff, he couldn't just start extorting the local business owners because that was what they were expecting from him, that would be terrible.

Except... Returning things would without a doubt cause a mess. And from what he could see, these were some of the near exact supplies he

had been trying to figure out how to procure for the safe houses...

Maybe he could go talk to the various shop owners in person and work out a relatively low cost trade of protection for just the bare essentials the kids would need. That wasn't extortion, right? It wasn't like he'd be asking for *money*. That was just... Creatively coordinating community support for their disenfranchised youth.

Tim could probably work out an amount per site that wouldn't cause too many problems to their overall revenue while also compounding into enough to outfit the safe houses at least to start with.

A hand waving in his face broke through his reverie. "Hey, weird guy, are you broken? If you are, can I take Redbird?" Despite the flippant words, Luke's face was scrunched in genuine concern.

Right, scheming later, kids now. Tim could do this.

"Yes I'm fine, no you can't steal my dog" Tim laughed. It sounded a little forced even to his own ears. "Just spaced out for a second trying to think of where things are going to go from here. Thank you guys for doing that for me. You saved me a lot of legwork on that." And brought him just as much, if not more, to do in the future.

There was no mistaking the little lights that sparked in all of them at his words, even raspy as they were. Jason's ears reddened, Marianne refused to look at him, despite the way she grinned, though Layla had no such hang ups and smiled at him whole-heartedly. And there was nothing but warmth in Luke's face as his worry softened. These kids probably didn't hear much from adults that was positive. Something else for Tim to work on changing.

"It was nothing. You should've seen the looks on some of their faces

when we turned up and said what we were there for," Jason shrugged, plucking an apple from a bag and inspecting it critically.

Yeah, Tim could imagine. Those were going to be fun conversations, trying to explain to adults why he had literal children doing his apparent dirty work.

Tiny paws hit the floor as Redbird wriggled herself into an impossible position and she slipped from the chair. Layla slithered after her, slipping to the floor and burying her face in Redbird's coat. Weeks of food and care really had done wonders for the tiny dog, finally more than skin, bones, and mange. Still, Tim was going to keep his careful monitor on her until she had more muscle on her. She was so *tiny* .

“I’m sure you were all excellent representatives,” Tim said with mock seriousness. “But maybe you can just do a normal grocery run next time you insist on being helpful.”

The real question was whether he should keep having the kids make these rounds for him. While it was certainly a good way to make them feel useful, they risked being identified as his associates and jumped. Maybe Time could find a way to make sure that no one even *thought* about touching the kids when they were doing rounds for him. Of course, there was always a random element in Gotham, and Tim wasn’t going to delude himself that he could protect them from *everything* . That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to try, though.

But even thinking about that kind of theatrical intimidation made his head pound, so Tim set the details aside for the meantime.

For now, he was going to tease the hell out of these kids and try to give his immune system the time it needed to recover.

--

A week and a half.

That was how long it took before Tim could finally return to doing his own fieldwork. He *had been perfectly fine, thank you very much* at half that, but the chipmunks had ratted him out to Maggie, and between them all they had managed to keep him in his apartment until, quote, 'he had more width and colour than a linen sheet.'

In that time, he had received another few bags of various supplies, and the kids had given him reports on the states of every safe house location, current and prospective. Luke had gotten a talking to when he had come home all scratched up three days in. Apparently, Layla had thought it was a good idea to climb up the stripped interior of a ramshackle house and Luke had caught her when she fell, incidentally shielding her when the remains of the wall had come down on top of them. While Tim commended his bravery, and really he couldn't outright tell him not to do that kind of thing without being a massive hypocrite, he had warned the boy about the importance of taking care of keeping himself safe when helping others.

…

In retrospect that might still have been kind of hypocritical. Whoops.

At least there was one good thing that came out of his time trapped in his apartment on threat of angry children and a terrifying old woman. He had managed to do a usually mind-numbing amount of CTV stakeouts, and between that and skimming through nearly every delivery record in lower Gotham, Tim had cemented his suspicions about the coffee shop. Either it was a front for something, or they were putting some *seriously* dangerous chemicals in that coffee. Knowing Crane, it might be both.

Tim was taking a day trip to find out. He was setting aside the full afternoon just to be safe, given how large the line for that place got sometimes. Also because he liked the idea of sitting in a cafe to draft ideas for his semi-legal medicine plan after being stuck in the same tiny apartment for so long.

A change in scenery might help him figure out how to handle the problematic logistics of distribution. It would be pretty counterproductive if dealers cut his product to sell higher quantities, or laced it with their own unique hooks to keep customers. Not to mention the risks of exposing often desperate non-users to people motivated to foster addictions. But it wasn't like he could just give his stuff to pharmacies to sell to people instead of their ridiculously more expensive prescriptions.

Or could he?

Looked like Tim had picked a good day to come for his recon, the line to Your Morning Beans only spanning about a third of the block. He might make it in the door within the hour after all. Whether he was lucky enough to actually snag a table, well. Tim wouldn't hold his breath.

Secretly, Tim was a little glad he had been forced to put this off until he was back to full health. The sun was fairly aggressive, and even with the shorter line, he was going to be stuck standing around for quite a while. Doing this while still struggling to breathe would have been not quite a nightmare, but certainly very unpleasant.

Tim was so lost in thought, comparing what little he knew about the handful of pharmacies across Crime Alley and their staff to determine who would be best to approach with his proposal, that he completely missed the approaching person until he was being loomed over.

“Hey champ, fancy seeing you here!” A shadow and a booming voice cut through Tim’s thoughts, and a warm hand clamped down on his shoulder before his ingrained flight instincts could even start looking for an out. “How have you been? It seems like ages since we’ve last seen each other.”

If there was one thing Tim hadn’t missed about his own time, it was dealing with Bruce’s daytime personas. This one looked to be incognito, as much as he could be, with the whole sunglasses, hat, and dressed down in more locally appropriate clothes. It made sense, Tim supposed, that Bruce would be doing his own undercover work at this stage in the game. Sending a recovering twelve year old was just a recipe for disaster. Though Dick might be away at the moment on his assassin internship, Tim wasn’t really sure. Damn their early poor record keeping. Understanding didn’t mean Tim was happy about getting caught up in it.

At least here and now Tim could pretend not to know him. Odds weren’t great of that being an actual deterrent, but Tim could at least try.

“Sorry, I think you’ve got the wrong person,” Tim muttered, avoiding eye contact and hunching his shoulders to look smaller. If he could subtly attract attention to them, Bruce might be forced to give it up or risk blowing his cover. So, pitiful teenager being accosted by a strange adult man it was.

“I have a great memory for faces, not so much for names, but even I’d have to be an idiot to forget how stressed you looked the other day. It’s great to see you’re feeling better, Alvin.” Blindingly bright, plastic smile activated. And a complete disregard for how creepy it ought to be that he knew Tim’s ‘name’ given he hadn’t exactly introduced himself in the clinic.

Hands shoved in his pockets, Tim did his best to subtly shake off the hand still holding him in place. “I was fine then, and I’m fine now. Just needed some rest. And to be left alone by people I don’t know.”

“I know it’s a little unorthodox, but I couldn’t help being worried about you!” Bruce was at least doing a good job of seeming genuinely distressed, but Tim was more annoyed by the ease with which he was deflecting attention from the rest of the poor bastards stuck in this line. “I know your parents aren’t in the picture, and it’s never easy to find a place for yourself once you leave foster care. I just wanted to check and see if there was anything I could do to help.”

Ugh, buried under the gross invasion of privacy that really did sound like legitimate concern. If Tim wasn’t a lying liar who’s entire life was currently based on lies, he might feel a little bit bad about stressing Bruce out over someone who didn’t actually need his help. As it was, he was starting to debate the merits of just leaving and coming back to investigate tomorrow. Or tonight. Or anytime that was not right this second so he could not be dealing with this right now.

“No, I don’t need your help. I’m fine,” Tim snapped.

Bruce’s hands came up, clearly trying to placate him. “Let me just treat you to coffee and you can reassure an old man’s concerns.”

“You’re not old, you’re in your mid-twenties.” Tim squinted at him suspiciously. How old did Bruce think he was, anyways? He had clearly looked into his ‘background,’ so he must be aware that Alvin Draper was legally nineteen. At this point in the timeline they were only about six years apart in age.

That hadn’t been a joke, but Bruce laughed like it was anyways. “Gee thanks, sport. Glad to hear I have a few years left. But really. Just give me a couple hours of your time to make sure you’re alright.”

Tim was supposed to say no. He was here for a reason, the longer whatever this place was doing was left unchecked, the more likely someone was going to get hurt. He also couldn't afford for Bruce to get too familiar with him, or he'd be putting the whole time stream at risk.

"Fine, but I'm getting something expensive because I know you can afford it." Tim was an idiot. An idiot who missed his dad. Maybe he could come back tomorrow to be a snoop and take today to do preliminary recon.

Bruce beamed and Tim quashed down the part of him that longed to reach out and hug him.

This was definitely a mistake.

Chapter End Notes

It has, once again, been a hot minute since I've posted anything. My apologies, but also these things happen? And I've once again been scattering my writing across so many projects I'm basically not finishing anything at the moment. Hence why this chapter is a touch shorter than normal. But hey! Plot! Sort of.

Bruce wasn't supposed to be here, but Captain Paranoia wouldn't leave so now we have a truly hijinxical situation on our hands. Curses :p

In a self indulgent plug, I'm still working on that podcast, and the episode going out this Wednesday is one we did on Batgirl at like midnight. We did one on cinematic Batmen through the ages which you can check out here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsdLXTTr46Q and we've started doing livestreams on Thursdays at around 7 MST here: https://www.twitch.tv/nerdcrusade

And now that I've finished being a shameless self-promoter, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and that you're all continuing to

be safe < 3

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the line slowly inched forwards, Tim did his best to block Bruce's attempts at conversation.

Bruce wasn't making it easy for him, though.

"You left in quite the rush the other day, didn't even stop to say goodbye. Were you off to something in particular?" His tone was jovial, but Tim had been in this game too long to be anything but blatantly suspicious at the immediate interrogation. He was pointedly not thinking about the way every word out of Bruce's mouth felt like a blow to his chest.

"I had to pick up my prescription. The sooner the better," Tim answered tersely. Give a nice, neat, and complete answer. Don't dodge the question, but don't give enough for a proper discussion either. He could get through this.

Bruce's grin didn't budge at the stonewalling. "Excellent! It's great to hear you're taking care of yourself. Doc Leslie is very good at her job, so as long as you're following her advice, you can be sure you'll be right as rain in no time."

Tim just hummed, stifling a laugh at the hypocrisy in Bruce encouraging someone to follow medical advice.

"I'll admit to being curious on how you managed to get so sick in the first place. Whatever happened must have been nasty to so thoroughly

put down a strong young man like yourself." And there was the next prod. Not even trying to be subtle. Tim *knew* Bruce could do better than this, so the real question became; why did Bruce want 'Alvin' to be aware of his interest in his well-being?

Maybe he thought Tim was involved with some kind of criminal activity here in the Alley. Sick to his stomach, Tim had to admit he wouldn't be wrong.

"Got unlucky with a broken pipe. Didn't heal well. It happens," Tim shrugged. Clipped sentences were the way to go, if only because Tim wasn't actually totally confident his voice wasn't going to break. Not when he was thinking that maybe Bruce was pretending to care about him to get some kind of information from him.

On the other hand, maybe a little bit of vulnerability would spook Bruce into leaving him alone.

Decisions, decisions.

Bruce's gaze raked up and down him quickly, no doubt looking for the injury responsible, sharper than 'Brucie' had any right to be. Come to think of it, other than the speech mannerisms and the blatant disregard for personal boundaries, Bruce was barely playing the persona at all. He certainly hadn't been in the clinic, though that had likely been more involuntary than this. This instance couldn't have been planned, Tim was too careful these days for that, but there was the hint of something calculated to the way Bruce was holding himself. He was clearly trying to convey *something* , leaning in ever so slightly, angled towards Tim, but maintaining at least a little distance since Tim denied his touch.

"Sounds pretty unpleasant, sport. With your medical history, you've gotta keep an eye on even small injuries. Or get someone who can

keep an eye for you. Who knows what could sneak up on you otherwise?”

Presence, Tim decided. Bruce was trying to assert his presence as non-threateningly as possible. But that just spiraled back to his earlier question; why was Bruce doing this? What was he hoping to achieve?

The line moved again, finally inside the shop proper, and Tim quickly took stock. Pretty standard layout; a decent number of tables, a somewhat cramped counter with an impressive number of machines behind it, and a chalkboard menu in a mostly-legible scrawl. Nothing immediately suspicious. Tim used the seconds pretending to skim the menu gave him to formulate a response.

Nearly everything on the menu was some kind of blended, mixed, or otherwise noticeably altered drink. Surprisingly cheap for the amount of work that had to go into each drink, and simple brew coffee or tea were noticeably absent. Suspicious.

Best to be just a little hostile to Bruce’s prodding. “I can look after myself just fine. It’s never been a problem before, and it isn’t a problem now.”

And there, something Tim would normally call a crack in Bruce’s facade, but here and now that didn’t feel like an accurate description. It was the same look Bruce got when Tim had assured him and Alfred that, no he didn’t need a ride to school he could just walk the few blocks to the nearest bus stop and it would be fine. Like he was listening to a child insist they didn’t need help down from a fire escape they were clearly stuck on.

Tim should probably be insulted. Instead he was warm.

But this Bruce was caring about a lie, and Tim could never admit that to him. At least, not unless he managed to get home.

A large vanilla frappe with two shots of espresso and three pumps of raspberry ought to make his point.

“Of course you can, but everyone needs a break sometimes and there’s no shame in building connections or relying on others.”

Tim didn’t bother hiding his scowl at such blatant hypocrisy. This was well before Bruce started allying himself openly with other heroes beyond the occasional Justice League mission when he deemed the need dire enough. “I have as much of a support network as I need.”

At that Bruce raised an eyebrow, arching it over the frame of his sunglasses. “It never hurts to have an extra number to call in case of an emergency. Just in case.”

There wasn’t a chance in hell Tim would willingly contact the Bruce of this time. Way too risky. And Tim didn’t want the temptation anywhere near him. He couldn’t rely on his not-yet family for help. Not without ruining everything.

Pointedly ignoring him, Tim rattled his sugary monster of an order to the barista, who’s immaculate customer service smile didn’t even twitch as he turned to Bruce, once again looming over Tim like an overly-protective bird. “Alright, and for dad?”

“Oh, ha ha, actually-”

“He is *not* my father.”

The barista's eyes widened at touch at the tight anger Tim hadn't meant to allow into his sharp reply. He hadn't meant to say it at all. Who cared if some guy in a coffee shop thought there was some kind of resemblance there? Tim sure shouldn't. And it wasn't the barista's fault Tim so desperately wished he could call this Bruce his dad.

Bruce was eyeing Tim carefully, pulling back a touch to hover slightly left, but spoke to the barista regardless. "Just a regular coffee for me, I'm afraid I probably couldn't pronounce half of the names you've got up there."

"I'm sorry sir, but we don't actually offer a plain brew. We have an almond blend that's fairly close, if you'd prefer to keep it simple?" The barista's plastic tone was back, and Tim had to respect the professional response, even if there was something just a little too perfect about his cheery apology. Maybe he had just been doing this for a while.

"That's fine then. How much do I owe you?" Bruce asked, hands twitching once, twice, before pulling out his wallet. Disappointingly, though perhaps Tim should have expected it, he didn't even flinch at the price, and simply paid quickly before shooing Tim to the side counter to wait.

Tim steadfastly refused to make eye contact.

Instead, he focused on the only other visible employee, flitting from machine to machine and serving drinks at a frankly astonishing rate. They didn't even seem to be looking towards the cashier, and Tim couldn't see an order screen. Either they were actually listening, with an amazing memory, and incredible multitasking skills, or something else was going on.

Or there was just something Tim was missing. God only knew how many clues slipped peoples' notice because they were overly confident in their own perceptual abilities, and Tim wasn't going to fool himself into thinking he wasn't incredibly distracted right now.

Case in point, even though he still wasn't looking anywhere near Bruce, Tim was painfully aware of him finishing with the cashier and heading his way.

Maybe the cashier had a microphone and the barista had an earpiece?

"Should be just a couple of minutes now. In the meantime, how about you tell me about your work?" Another laugh that may as well have been pulled straight out of soup can. "I don't think I caught what you do earlier."

No eye contact. Just keep watching the barista. Tim was no expert on coffee making, but he had a sneaking suspicion some of those machines weren't working the way they were supposed to.

"That'd be because I didn't say what I do for work. I do freelance computer engineering."

The loom over his shoulder shifted, and Tim could practically see the raised eyebrow asking for elaboration. His mouth was moving before he could curb the instinct.

"I have a little of my own equipment, and my foster sister taught me enough to make myself useful." No need to mention that Babs' idea of *useful* involved hacking international government agencies.

“That’s very impressive. Not many people are able to start a business like that by themselves without any connections. Unless your foster sister helped with some contacts?”

As he spoke, Bruce sidled back into his field of vision, clearly trying not to infringe while also looking to get a good look at Tim’s face. So Tim kept himself painfully neutral just to be difficult. Definitely not because otherwise he might be liable to cry.

Definitely not.

Babs would be maybe fourteen right now, spine intact and wreaking havoc on her teachers and classmates. She might even already be working at that library. It would only be a couple of years until she hit the streets as Batgirl for the first time. Tim couldn’t begin to guess at her hacking abilities just yet, but chances were she was already well on her way to being a force to be reckoned with.

And of course, she had no idea who Tim was. Wouldn’t for years.

Mutely, Tim shook his head. Hopefully Bruce would be sensitive enough not to push.

“Large vanilla frappe with raspberry and espresso and an almond blend for Harry?”

Bruce glanced briefly at Tim before moving to their drinks without a comment, and Tim took the opportunity to claim a small table with a good view of both the exit and the counter. No need to get careless, there was still work to do here.

Tim should have known better than to hope for Bruce's emotional intelligence.

"Are you no longer in contact with your foster sister then? I would think she had to have been fond of you to teach you enough to sell technical services to others." He placed the atrocity of a drink in front of Tim, and settled into the only other seat at the table. It should have looked comical, a man of his size in a spindly cafe chair, but somehow he looked utterly at ease, as if he came here every week.

Had to give him props for trying to set what he must think of as an irresponsible hoodlum at ease.

Too bad Tim absolutely was *not* interested in being comfortable here. If he got too comfortable, he might let something slip or worse. He might be tempted again to tell Bruce *everything* , despite already resolving to handle this one his own. Batman already *had* a partner, after all.

Not to mention the potential ramifications to the timeline.

Though, speaking of, this conversation really ought to be enough to ping any half-competent monitor of the timestream off that Tim wasn't where he was supposed to be.

Maybe he should consider packing.

Tim took a sip of his frappe to buy some time, and it was exactly as tooth-rottingly sweet as he'd expected. Lovely. But hey, maybe it was time for a good ol' redirection. "Why'd you tell them your name was Harry, when we both know that's not true, Mr. Wayne?"

Bruce didn't actually grimace, but Tim was more than familiar with the slight tick in his jaw that meant he wanted to. "I'm sure you can imagine I don't always want to attract attention to myself. Today I was just hoping to get a personal taste of what I've been told is the best coffee in town."

It was becoming rapidly clear Tim should have gotten something a little simpler, because there was just no way to tell if there was anything unusual in his drink. He should also probably stop drinking it. Which was a shame since it was actually pretty good.

"But tell me," Bruce spoke again before Tim had the time to mull over a response to keep himself on the offensive. "Do you have any kind of portfolio I could take a look at? We're always hiring for bright young minds, and with computers becoming more and more important, we certainly need people like you who actually understand how they work."

Tim's mouth went dry. He could say yes. He could take a job at WE, and from there he could keep a closer eye on what Bruce and Dick were up to, and it would give him a more solid income he could invest locally. If he worked hard, he could probably end up in charge of their IT department, which would mean he might even get to keep semi-regular contact with his-

No. That way would only lead to temptation that would end with Tim breaking time. If he took a job at WE, if he put the effort into truly carving out a place for himself in this here and now, he might never be able to bring himself to leave. And sure, he was already considering long term projects and how best to help as many of his people as possible, but this wouldn't be a personal commitment. This would be a *corporate* commitment that, even when tied to a fake name, would feel like a leash.

But he'd be *so close* .

Tim hesitated, wanting so badly to offer to show Bruce some of his projects and simultaneously wanting to run headlong out of the coffee shop and never look back.

What settled it wasn't any logical argument either way; Tim couldn't help but think about the kids who had turned his apartment into their own crappy escape, and how a steady nine-to-five would force him out of the house for so much longer. He couldn't leave any of them to fend for themselves; he still hadn't found something permanent for the girls, who had been sleeping across the hall in Maggie's, and Luke was over nearly every day. Hell, even Jason was finally putting on enough weight to soften a few of his desperate edges.

He couldn't step back to go be some white collar asshole again.

"I'm sorry, I haven't got anything like that," Tim finally spoke, and when Bruce looked ready to offer something else Tim cut him off. "And even if I did, I'm not interested. I like working for myself."

Bruce still looked like he wanted to argue, hands a hair too tight around his mug, but finally he nodded and reached for his pocket. He pulled out a business card and a pen, setting both on the table between them. "I can understand that. However, we do offer contract work on occasion. Could I get at least an email or something so we can send over work that needs an external perspective?"

He could say no. He totally could. He'd already done it once, all he had to do was say it again.

Tim slid the card across the table and snatched up the pen. It was the same one he had used in the clinic.

“If you spam my inbox with anything that’s not contract, I *will* change my professional email just to spite you,” he said tersely, scrawling out the email he’d been directing most clients to. The ones that were securely above board, anyways. Turned out a surprising number of criminals were getting into digital organization these days, and where there were spreadsheets there were at least two people who hated dealing with them.

Who was Tim to turn down an easy-in to their operations?

When Tim looked back up, Bruce was *smiling at him* . Not his media grin, or his professional smile, or even his *getting-what-he-wanted* smirk; it was all quiet amusement and barely upturned lips, and Tim could almost hear him telling him he’d done well tonight and to make sure he finished his homework before bed.

Almost.

And that was his cue to leave, before he did something embarrassing like tear up or tell the truth. Tim shoved himself up, more abruptly than he would have liked, and scooped his drink up. “Thanks for the coffee, *Harry* . Let’s not do this again.”

That got him a laugh, and that little smile ticked another notch wider. “I don’t know about that. I enjoyed this. Stay safe, Alvin.”

Tim turned away sharply, and made a very tactical retreat. He would come back to investigate the cafe in depth later. Right now he had to leave before anything could happen to extinguish the warmth in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

> Well hey there people of the internet who I have been thoroughly neglecting for some time now! I'd make excuses about being busy

and having the mental capacity of oatmeal most days (both of which are true!), but honestly I've just been all over the place and Bruce is truly a difficult man to write. He just. Wants to dad and keeps trying to derail my story because Tim so badly wants familiarity. The bastard.

Thankfully, I can sort of avoid him next chapter, probably, or at least avoid him speaking, so at least that won't get in my way! I think. There are a lot of conditionals here for a reason.

Also, fun fact, we're slowly approaching the one year anniversary of this fic! Which is insane that I'm still working on this because usually my attention span is not this good. It does mean that the sunk cost fallacy is gripping me by the throat, which good news for y'all means I'm that much more likely to actually get to the ending of this damn thing!

Thanks for all of your patience and lovely comments (that I swear I'll reply to eventually), and I hope you're all staying as safe and healthy as possible!!! Have a great day!!!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Recon, take two. This time, hopefully, without any deeply uncomfortable conversations and drinks that Tim had later decided were definitely drugged. The question was, what exactly had it been drugged *with* ? Tim hadn't been able to notice any major discrepancies in his own behaviour, though whether that was because he simply hadn't drank enough or because the effects were too subtle, he couldn't say.

At least he'd managed to get some other things done in the aftermath of that mess at the cafe.

He'd made his rounds with the neighbourhood, had a few *very* awkward conversations with people who weren't entirely sure they should take him seriously, and had successfully gotten a handful of the locals to agree to supply goods he could stock the safehouses with. Now all he had to do was actually get a location suitable for more than just Gotham's worryingly large rat population, and the kids would have somewhere to actually spend the night, since they had all been so adamant about never staying long after he fed them.

Tim was starting to wonder if they'd come up with some sort of agreement regarding that. It would both answer some questions, while raising many more.

He'd also managed to identify a good half dozen drug dealers that he was pretty certain he could tail at least one back to a production center some time soon, so even if tonight's investigation didn't pan out the way he was hoping, Tim had a respectable Plan B ready to go.

For his night infiltration of the coffee shop, Tim wasn't committing entirely to the vigilante bit, if only because getting caught in a suit of future tech was still far too dangerous, but he was at least wearing a domino and his body armour once again. He seriously contemplated his cape, before finally passing over it. Even camera footage of a new cape would cause so many problems, there was no way it was worth it. The weather was a touch colder than he would have liked, though painfully standard for Gotham, so Tim doubled up with a jacket and a hoodie.

It wasn't like he didn't have experience hiding bright red-under-black in shadows. It would almost be nostalgic.

Crouching in the shadows on the roof behind the cafe certainly was, the wistful pang deep enough that Tim half expected to feel the shift of shadows behind him. That or there should have been a flicker of darkness across from him as Bruce worked a lock while Tim stood watch.

Tim was so busy waxing poetic about stakeouts and infiltrations long gone, he almost missed the very real movement on the cafe's roof. First a looming shadow and then a smaller, brighter tag-along.

Was Dick already back on the streets? Sure it had been weeks, but his injuries had been nasty. Tim really should have been paying more attention to vigilante movements, but he'd gotten so caught up in his own work he'd forgotten to keep the appropriate tabs. And now, here they were, breaking into the same building Tim had been moments from entering.

If given the chance, they would undoubtedly take most if not all the most pressing evidence, and might even tag some of the equipment with tracers. If this was recon for them too, they might leave enough behind that Tim could use it, but if this was a full bust then odds were low there'd be anything.

Either way, if Batman and Robin were on the case, whoever was behind this was most assuredly going down. Tim wasn't necessary.

He should just walk away now.

But this was still his neighbourhood, people depending on him, and it would give him a leg up in his ongoing operations.

There wasn't time to go over the options in detail, so Tim went with his gut.

He dropped down into the alley, taking care to do so silently and entirely out of Batman's line of sight. Robin might miss him, he was still young after all, but Tim wasn't going to take his chances with the eyes in the back of Batman's head. The roof was out as a means of entry, which meant the odds of Tim triggering an alarm on the way in ticked up, but he wasn't out of options quite yet.

Stepping carefully so as not to disturb the broken glass underfoot, Tim approached the rear access door. Locked, of course, and certainly with something fancier than a cafe in this area ought to be able to afford, but that was just another piece to the growing puzzle of Tim's suspicion.

It wasn't a fair contest; a fancy lock twelve years ago was still a lock from twelve years ago. There may have been a rather clever mechanism to trigger an alarm if a key without what Tim suspected to be plastic lining entered the keyway, but Tim had enough experience with locks that would outright taser an attempted thief, so his tools were very carefully crafted ceramics. No currents running through these and finishing circuits tonight, thanks.

Once he was certain he wasn't going to set off anything electronic, the lock itself was nothing special; just a standard five pin with two spools. Only a step above child's play, probably to keep the literal children around out.

Tim entered quickly, well aware he was on a very *, very* short time limit. He had maybe two minutes before Batman and Robin were inside, and from there it would be a race to get out with whatever he could get his hands on before they saw him and inevitably chased him halfway across the city. Given the opportunity, they might even catch him. Tim may be used to racing Nightwing, who really had only gotten more efficient at flying with every year, but he was also used to an older Batman, and while his Bruce had never been *slow,* Tim would be a fool to discount the possibility that younger meant faster. So it would be pursuit by a faster, unknown Batman and a small child that had almost no concept of his own safety once he got in the air.

Best to avoid that entirely.

In the interest of time, Tim beelined straight behind the counter, following his gut suspicion that there had to be something under the main facade. While there was nothing immediately suspicious, no obvious trap doors at least, some of the syrups were... Not quite the colours Tim would have expected. And the consistency of the sugar was irregular, almost as if it had been poorly ground or it was composed of more than one substance...

Tim took samples of almost everything and moved on, the timer in his head already warning him of how little time he had.

To the back, passed the one bathroom, through the 'Employees Only' door. It may have been locked, but Tim didn't even bother with proper picking, raking it open in a couple of seconds and moving on.

Boxes; probably supplies, though unlabelled.

Cleaners; bought in bulk apparently.

A mop and bucket; kind of gross if Tim was being honest, had probably been sitting with the same water for at least a week.

Stairs; bingo.

Tim was down like a shot, trying to keep as quiet as he could, but more concerned with his ever-dwindling time.

At the bottom, three doors.

Eenie, meenie, minie; left. Old habit, starting left and working across, a strategy that had served Tim well for years.

And it didn't fail him now. Inside were stacks of plastic-wrapped boxes and jugs, all conspicuously labelled with warnings. Chemicals, then. Probably sourced from somewhere official-ish, going by all the packaging, though Tim kind of doubted any university worth a damn would sell psilocybin to somewhere selling food.

Unless this place was owned by a parent company that *could* buy that kind of thing...

Food for thought, later.

Tim snapped pictures of labels, took a couple of samples so he could verify the contents, and moved on.

Tick tock.

Middle door next. Locked, raked, opened.

What was even the point of locking a door if your locks were going to suck so badly?

This room wasn't as immediately incriminating, what looked like a coffee drip and a grinder were set up. Tim almost could have believed they were completely innocuous if it wasn't for the very obviously not-coffee powder mixed in with the beans in the grinder that all but disappeared in the grounds in the drip.

So much for almond blend.

Tim took samples and moved on.

What was behind poorly locked door number three?

A jackpot, relatively speaking.

It looked like something straight out of a meth lab, which was concerning for the potential property damage alone, never mind the product itself. Which probably wasn't meth, though Tim couldn't really be sure just yet.

Except, that was, for the very particular shade of green of one of the compounds that was being filtered out.

Fear gas before it was aerosolized. Wonderful.

Tim supposed he should be thankful that didn't seem to have made its way into any of the beverages just yet. Maybe this was early enough in the timeline Scarecrow hadn't moved to his broader scaled human experiments yet.

The next big thing to look for, then, would be sedatives that could be used to dose patrons to pick up for those *smaller* experiments.

In the back of his head, Tim was picking apart the set-up; what he could use, what he could sell, what should probably be trashed and incinerated for the greater good...

It was first the barest noise over Tim's head that cut off his reverie, and then a bright voice with a probably unheard response. He had overstayed his welcome.

There was no time to do anything about all the doors he had unlocked, and if he could hear them then Batman and Robin were almost certainly on the ground floor.

"Wow Bats, for so much security up top, they didn't even lock their doors!"

Shit.

Tim immediately moved behind the array of chemicals, hoping for the paranoia of criminals to pay off with a secret exit. A tunnel, a ladder, hell Tim would take sewer access as long as it would get him out of here *now* .

...

He shouldn't have jinxed it.

All he had was a man-sized grate in the floor.

Down into the sewers it was, and Tim could only hope that he didn't catch Croc's eye. He was pretty sure Jones was still a full-on cannibal at this point.

Tim grimaced at the texture of the ladder, even through his gloves. Slimy and gritty. Best not to think too hard about whatever it was. He carefully closed the grate behind him, and hoped that Batman and Robin would be occupied enough with the contents of the rooms to give him time to get away.

Luck was, as always, not on his side. Just as it occurred to Tim that he had left the door to the room open, he also remembered just why he had developed his left-first search system; Nightwing always started on the right.

A panicked glance up, and sure enough, peering through the slats was a young Robin, so painfully young with a few still yellowing bruises on his bare arms, surprised, mouth already open to call out.

Tim did the only thing he could think of and opened the grate, hard, slamming it into Robin's face, and dropped the rest of the way into the sewer with a splash.

Gross, but no time. Batman would have heard Robin's cry of pain and was probably already behind him.

Split second debate over turning on a light, before Tim dismissed it and stepped farther into the shadows cast by the slight light from above instead. He was familiar enough with Gotham's sewers to make it out of sightlines in the dark, and from there he could fiddle and check if the domino he was wearing was one of the ones with night vision or not. If he was lucky, he'd be able to use the cover of the darkness all the way until he could find an exit.

If not, he'd have to risk the wrath of Bats and Croc alike.

Tim shifted farther from the entrance to the left, taking care not to disturb the water(?) too much, just in time for a large black shape to drop, followed immediately by a smaller one, wrapped in yellow.

He barely dared to breathe, each movement careful as he ducked into a debris alcove. Running would only get him caught. He couldn't outrun them in a straight-way.

Click.

Sounded like Batman had decided to err on the side of flashlights. Not good right now, but it meant they didn't have night vision tech, and that was information Tim could *use* . Assuming he didn't get dragged out into the light in the next thirty seconds.

There were two paths, one going either direction away from the ladder. Bruce was unlikely to let Dick go anywhere alone within months of the Two-Face incident, but Dick might force the issue of splitting up.

Or he might take point and lead them to the right.

Let Robin take them right.

"Which way?" Dick's voice, serious and a little thick (Tim had probably hit his nose, hopefully he hadn't broken it).

"They could have gone either direction, where does your gut tell you to look?" There was anger in Batman's voice, but also a softness. He was using this as a teaching moment, and if Tim wasn't careful he would end up the lesson.

But, more importantly, it sounded like they were going to stick together.

Tim pressed the back of his head against the grimy bricks, fighting the urge to tense up and risk making a sound.

Just a little longer, and he could go back up into the cafe and head out.

"This way!" And Dick was off, splashing through the water *away* from Tim's hiding spot. Not a second later, there was more movement.

Tim dared to peak around the corner, and sure enough the lights were retreating, quickly disappearing around a corner.

He didn't sigh in relief, but it was a near thing, and Tim let himself relax back into the brick, eyes slipping closed behind his domino.

His relief was ripped apart by the barest sound of water slicking off of scales, replaced by a stone of old terror deep in his belly.

"What do we have here, a little rat hiding from Bats?"

Chapter End Notes

Well. One month and a bit is definitely better than the two + there was between updates last. I actually wrote most of this in one sitting today and have barely edited, so there'll probably be some editing somewhere down the line, but who knows. Definitely not me, that's for sure.

In other news, university online continues to feel fake but I am trying very hard to still do things for it, and the weird podcast is still trying to eat more of my time and I keep beating it back with a broom. This weeks episode was on Soul Eater! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtHfQrzIkNU

This chapter was fun! Tim trying to speedrun an investigation with limited success, and also sprinklings of angst. Things were admittedly shorter than normal, but I think that cliffhanger is fun, and will not be persuaded to go farther in this chapter :p

Thanks for dropping by and reading, I hope you're all staying safe and healthy as the world continues to threaten to combust, and that you, the person reading this specifically, have a wonderful day <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This was still salvageable. All Tim had to do was think fast, or be faced with a likely very pointy and unpleasant end. No pressure.

Tim's mouth was moving before he had anything resembling a plan."I dunno about rat. At worst I'm like. A statistically unlikely frog. Historically speaking, I'm probably a bird, though."

The shifting darkness in front of him pulled apart a foot and a half or so above eye level, revealing a glint of teeth. Please let it be humour and not a threat display. Of course, with Jones there was no reason it couldn't be both.

"Rat, frog, bird, doesn't really matter. Either way you ought to know better than to come wandering around *my* sewers." Tim could feel the timbre of his voice in his bones, and he spared half a thought for a quick worry about Batman and Robin hearing their exchange. Thirty seconds away wasn't all that far, and for better or for worse the acoustics down here were pretty incredible.

He raised his hands, letting one brush against his mask and *yes* there was the nightvision. Now he could see his possibly imminent death in thematically appropriate green. Wonderful. Though Jones didn't *look* particularly hungry...

"Not wandering, just poking my head in, misdirecting the Bat so I can go about my business. I'll be out of your metaphorical hair in no time." Tim braced a foot against the wall behind him, preparing to launch himself at a moment's notice. If this turned into a fight he was going to need every second he could get.

That grin widened, reptilian eyes flicking up and down, and Tim kind of regretted being able to see all the strands of whatever-that-was stuck between his teeth. It made sense that Jones didn't exactly brush his teeth often, but how comfortable could that be?

"I'm not worried about getting you out of 'my hair,'" oh god there were air quotes. "I'm more concerned about getting you out of my teeth later." And that was Tim's cue to get moving or get dead.

He jumped and pushed off the wall hard, forward and *up* , raised hands landing on Jones long enough to vault over him and twist around before his landing. Giving Jones his back was a great way to end up covered in inch-deep claw marks.

Jones roared at the contact, swiping clumsily at Tim even as he moved and lashing backwards with his tail before turning to face him, just a little off-balance.

That was odd. He was normally faster than that, and Tim's weight should have been nothing to him, especially not for such a short amount of time.

Duck, duck, sidestep, and yes Tim could see a weird tension to his movements and normally by now Jones ought to have dropped down to lunge and he *hadn't* .

Well, well, well, Waylon. How did you manage to get outright injured?

Whatever it was, Tim was fairly certain it was on his back, which meant that was where he had to get to if he wanted any chance at

surviving this fight. Maybe he could hit him hard enough to get up the ladder and out of here before he recovered.

Time for something stupid then, relying on Jones' apparent unwillingness to bend over.

A hard slide through grimy water and between Jones' legs, catching the edge of a stomp to his open jacket- fuck, rotate out of it, grab a sleeve and wrap the whole thing around the foot and *yank* .

Unsurprisingly, Jones didn't fall, but he *did* stumble, and that gave Tim the second he needed to get back to his feet, and it bought him a moment of distraction to see the damage.

Ouch .

Jones' back was torn open and dripping, a length of tangled barbed wire pressed deep into his skin and tearing it apart with each movement. What of the flesh Tim could see was slick and inflamed, and the scales were flaking off in bloody chunks.

Damn. Tim couldn't leave him like this.

New plan: get the wire out and *run like the Dickens* before Jones recovered enough to maul him. Jones had always healed almost suspiciously well, and could take it from there.

Easier said than done.

Another lash of a tail nearly cracked Tim's ribs, would have if he hadn't dropped down under the swing but it put him in a poor position to dodge the next strike. Two armed block and *twist* to glance the blow off without breaking both arms. The bruises and scratches were Future Tim's problem.

A roll through murky water got Tim enough breathing room to rise again, and then it was a very frustrating game of trying to get behind Jones while Jones was doing his best to disembowel Tim.

Probably not one for family game night, that one.

Speaking of *family* , Tim could hear footsteps splashing closer, which meant his window for getting through this without getting arrested was rapidly closing. Time for something reckless then.

Tim pulled one of his precious few throwing discs from his belt and switched off his nightvision. It's not like he'd be needing his eyes for this next bit anyways.

He thumbed first the timed self-destruct (no evidence), and then the deadman's trigger flashbang.

Closed his eyes.

And pitched it straight at Jones' rumbling throat.

The howl of pain was immediate, the light piercing even through Tim's eyelids, and he was moving.

Skidded right, ducked the flailing, opened his eyes and *there* , one end of the wire. Tim wrapped a hand around the end, the wire pricking at his leather-clad palms, and booked it for the ladder.

Jones' cry turned to a scream as the wire ripped loose, but there was no sound of pursuit, just those footsteps, nearly on them now.

Once there was no more resistance from the wire, about three rungs from the exit, Tim dropped it into the water below. No need to be dragging around bloody barbed wire, it would only raise questions.

Up the stairs, out the back door he had entered through, and then Tim hesitated. Roof or street? Sure *he'd* feel better once he got off of street level, but was that actually the best way to disappear? With just the now very dirty hoodie, if he ditched the domino he'd blend right in for Crime Alley's nightlife. And if he were to get caught on the rooftops that would be incredibly telling. He also now needed to find a different source for his lab equipment if he wanted to keep his timeline for getting the medical system up and running.

New time, new tactics.

Decision made, Tim peeled off the domino, tugged up his hood, and stepped out onto the street to track down a drug lab.

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Annoyingly, his second foray into creative resource acquisition went off without a hitch.

One he was sure he had lost the Bats, Tim had found one of the dealers he had pegged, trailed him for the evening, and swapped off to follow the guy who had conspicuously handed him a rather hefty looking backpack. Then he followed that guy back to a warehouse just shy of the docks, in which, surprise surprise, there was packaging and pill-making with materials too visibly fresh to have come from anywhere off property.

After that it was just a matter of slipping his domino back on, taking out guards without being seen, and offering the floor techs a deal; they could tell him who they worked for and keep working here, using new recipes with supplies that would start coming in three weeks time, or he could personally put down every single one of them and tip off the cops to what exactly they'd been getting up to here.

The first reaction had been a scoff, so Tim had pulled an experimental ace; the pistol he had taken from the trafficker. He had no intention of *using* it, but they didn't have to know that.

Even that hadn't gotten *quite* what he was looking for until Tim put a bullet in one of the lights, the sparks glancing across the blood on his hands still dripping from wounds hidden up his sleeves. Shout out to neuroticism that pushed Tim to train with any weapon he could get his hands on. Still, he had picked a near one just to be sure he could actually hit the damn thing.

Would have been pretty embarrassing to miss.

The display was enough to get at least grudging compliance, though Tim was certainly going to have to check up on them regularly to ensure they were sticking to the deal. At least until he dealt with their previous employer and could prove his system worked, at which point hopefully most of them would accept the income for what it was.

Thinking on it, Tim might have to put someone in charge who would ensure that no funny business went on. That ought to be a fun recruitment conversation.

In the meantime, Tim now had a hard timeline on acquiring recipes and supplies, and the name of a local drug lord who probably had the connections and resources Tim needed. Surely he'd be up to sharing, for the greater good of the community. And if he wasn't, well Tim was getting a knack for persuasion.

By the time Tim headed home, the sun was starting to stain the smog a burnt orange and his mind was whirling. If the drug lord didn't pan out he needed as back up. Maybe Ivy would be amenable? What could he offer her in exchange for a steady stream of otherwise expensive compounds? Maybe a park?

And he should also really finalize that starting capital, and his cursory poking at Cobblepot's digital system suggested he was as shrewd as ever and likely still kept the majority of his wealth either physically in the Iceberg Lounge or in a variety of liquid investments that couldn't be easily siphoned. Sneaky bastard.

Looked like Tim was going to have to carry out some more breaking and entering if he wanted to get at that money. Selina would be so proud.

Caught up in planning not just an infiltration but a full on *heist* , Tim was almost completely unprepared for one of the manholes in front of him to burst from the ground at skull-cracking speeds. Reflexes had him ducking rather than being decapitated, and then he was face to face with Waylon Jones for the second time in one day.

Fuck.

"You," he panted, pointing one clawed hand at him.

Tim nodded, sliding into a more mobile stance. If he could get to the rooftops, Jones couldn't follow but the property damage in his wake would be more than most of the locals could afford. "Me. What can I do for you?"

Jones' lip curled back off his teeth, and Tim honestly couldn't say if it was a snarl or a smile. "Why did you pull out the wire?"

What kind of question was that? That injury was *nasty* , and there was no excuse for leaving someone in that kind of pain. So Tim shrugged and said as much. No point lying, not about this.

Jones stared at him, dripping slowly onto the cracked pavement.

Running still wasn't out of the question, but it didn't look like Jones was angry anymore. Hopefully that was a good sign, though Tim couldn't help thinking of innocuous logs that ripped the throats out of unsuspecting swimmers.

"Would you be willing to clean it out?" Jones asked quietly, shoulders as hunched as they could be without likely aggravating his back more.

Tim was speechless, for just a moment. But that moment was enough for Jones' posture to tighten.

"I can't reach all that much back there, and if I don't clean them out soon they'll get infected and the next three weeks will *hurt* like a

bitch.” Jones’ jaw was working with enough force to splinter steel.

The stupid cut on Tim's arm, now fully healed, twinged in sympathy. Infections were the *worst.*

"Yeah I can help. Do you have somewhere specific you'd like to do this, or does it matter to you?" Tim asked, already running through locations in his head. No way could he bring Jones back to his apartment, but maybe one of the safehouses? Tim was pretty sure the one off 173rd had running water, and between his belt and possibly a pharmacy run that would cover at least basic supplies.

Shit, did Jones’s condition include any kind of immunity or circulation issues? Tim knew ichthyosis was normally a genetic and dermal issue, but it wasn’t like this was exactly a normal case. Had Jones undergone any further genetic manipulation yet? Should Tim treat this like a veterinary issue? If that was the case, was Jones more like a lizard or a dinosaur?

The things that having a shape-shifting teammate forced Tim to learn. First aid for tyrannosaurus rexes. If he ever saw Gar again, Tim might just have to thank him.

Mind, even if Tim were to treat this as strictly unusual human medical care, he still couldn’t be sure if it was safe to suture which is what his instincts said to do with lacerations of this size. Wasn’t the layer underneath the scaly dermis incredibly sensitive and vulnerable to external influences? Knowing Tim’s luck, the medical thread would tear right through and just complicate the issue.

“If you have somewhere safe, we can go there. Though if this is a trap I’ll rip your throat out and eat your liver.” Jones interrupted Tim’s train of thought. Right, Tim could probably just ask and hopefully Jones would know the best way to approach this.

Tim hummed thoughtfully. “I think I know a place that’ll work. If you’ll follow me?”

Jones grunted in acknowledgement and Tim began heading towards the only safehouse with running water he wouldn’t mind Jones knowing about. While it made Tim’s skin crawl to have him at his back, he *was* asking for a lot of trust here. It was the least he could do.

That, and with how slow Jones was, presumably from blood loss, Tim figured his odds of escape were okay as long as he heard the first blow coming.

“Do you know if your skin is safe to suture, because if it is I’d like to pick up some supplies to do that,” he asked, keeping his eyes forward, even as he’d prefer to try and gauge Jones’ response. Probably best *not* to unnecessarily antagonize the injured cannibal.

A growl that was definitely not a positive noise. “No stitches. I won’t be able to take them out myself, even if you can find a needle that’ll get through my skin. I heal fast anyway. Just clean out the sewage and metal shavings I can still feel in there. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Huh. If that was all he had to do, this would almost be *easy* . Though Tim couldn’t help running through ways he could still help. He didn’t feel good about leaving those gashes wide open, especially since the severity was partially his fault.

Maybe strategic application of duct tape would do the trick. It was the least he could do.

Hopefully Jones would be amenable.

Ahead of them, someone opened the door to a convenience store, took one look at Tim and Jones making their way down the street, and slammed it closed again. Wonderful, that surely wouldn't impact his incredibly weird relationship with the locals any.

He'd probably have to send the kids out for some damage control later.

In the meantime, they managed to arrive at the admittedly still kind of run down old office that was a little over halfway finished with its repairs. The structural stuff and most of the plumbing had been handled, and Tim was in the middle of sorting out its electricals and security measures. He was still unsure of a lot of the cameras' placements, and he was planning on running a few of them past the chipmunks before finalizing anything. There were a lot of fine lines to walk with this project, after all.

But the best part of this particular stage of incomplete construction meant there were still all kinds of tape lying around, but most of the plaster dust had been cleaned up.

Hmm. Electrical tape would probably have more stretch than duct tape, but it didn't really have the holding power. Decisions, decisions.

Jones looked around the property quietly, taking in the exposed wiring and various (stolen) tools lying around. He sat in the middle of the room where Tim indicated, while he went and disinfected with spray from his belt then filled up one of the buckets and grabbed some wipes from the first aid kit he kept here in case of chipmunk accidents. He'd have to use the tweezers from his belt, because there was absolutely no way Tim was going to use literal construction tools for medical care if he had any other choice, and the tweezers in the kit were too small.

To say Jones was a *good* patient would be a lie, but he didn't move *too* much. There was only a shiver at the first pour of water, and he stayed relatively still as Tim carefully wiped off the worst of the remaining muck. Jones twitched nearly every time Tim pulled one of the nastier metal shards or stones out, but Tim couldn't exactly blame him. Frankly he was still fairly impressed at the general lack of movement.

He wouldn't have imagined Jones had that much self control, honestly.

Once he got what debris he could out, Tim rinsed the injuries another few times, retreating to the sink to fill the bucket twice.

That was the easy bit.

"I have some disinfectant here, if I spray it on your back are you going to rip my face off?" Tim asked, breaking the nearly meditative silence they had fallen into without him noticing.

Another twitch from Jones, maybe he hadn't been expecting Tim to ask. "Based on what I know floats around down there, do it."

Tim nodded, before remembering he was firmly behind Jones. "Okay, on the count of three then. One, two," Normally Tim would have sprayed there, but sitting here cross-legged behind Jones was not a particularly good defensive position, so he opted for the side of survival. "Three."

Sure enough, Jones tensed just before the application, but at least for this it didn't really matter. Tim was thorough, because he *also* knew

the kinds of things that could be found in Gotham's sewers, and the idea of any of that getting into someone's body was flatly upsetting.

And it was time to push his luck a second time. "I'm also not super comfortable leaving these wide open, even if you say it'll be fine. I know you said no to stitches, but I do have some tape here that ought to be able to hold them closed at least for a while."

"Medical tape doesn't stick to my skin well, kid," Jones scoffed, still a little tight but calmer than Tim had heard him yet.

Tim let himself smile a little, since there was no way Jones could see it. "I wasn't actually offering medical tape. It's a little unorthodox, but I have some duct tape here I can disinfect that ought to do the job. Ideally you'd remove it carefully and flush the wounds periodically for the next couple of days, but I get that doing that by yourself for back injuries can suck."

Jones twisted around and stared at Tim, who wiped the smile from his face. There was always something a little unsettling about his eyes, the way they didn't quite fit his face, but this time there was something searching in the discrepancy. His nostrils flared like he would be able to smell the truth.

"How did you fuck up your back that bad?" he asked.

Tim blinked, but tried not to let his surprise show otherwise. He hadn't really expected a lot of personal inquiries here. Careful to match cadence, just a touch, he replied. "A handful of ways over the years. The worst was probably when I got caught trying to get away from an explosion and ended up burning my back to shit."

There was the distinct noise of clawed fingers tapping against scaled

skin, and Jones stared at him.

"Who do you work for?"

Another curve ball. Did Jones think someone was paying him to do this?

“These days? No one,” Tim answered honestly.

Jones made a noise that was somehow both a hum and a growl. Gotta respect the versatility of his vocal chords, apparently.

“Tape me up, then.”

Determined not to overthink whatever that had been about, Tim complied, carefully lining up the edges of the wounds as best he could and taping them shut. It wouldn’t hold if Jones went swimming or swinging around, but Tim kind of doubted he’d be doing too much of that anyways.

Optimism.

Once he was finished, Tim backed off, heading to the sink to wash his hands. Behind him, he heard Jones stand, and Tim resolutely did not turn around. The heavy footsteps retreated, the sound of the door opening and a slight grunt as Jones stopped slightly to fit through, and then Tim was alone.

Chapter End Notes

What's this? A chapter? That's kinda long because I'm A Fool who

couldn't stop rambling? Why yes, it's entirely possible! In this case, you can thank my stupid rubric-less sociology paper for getting me writing and then immediately losing my interest during a sprint so I worked on this instead. Fanfic wins again, I guess.

In my defense on the length of this chapter, I wanted to get the Croc First Aid done here, but I couldn't decide how to go about it for ages. Lizards are cold blooded so you sometimes use heatpacks to draw out fluids and crap, does that apply here? Lower layers of icthosyotic skin is super sensitive but there's like one singular article on how it heals from abrasions and shit, so I have no idea if sutures would work. I have so many questions. Thus cleaning and duct tape it had to be!

Next chapter may be a while with the holidays about to hit me with a sledgehammer, but then again maybe without the classwork for a couple of weeks I'll manage to get something out, we'll have to see. At least I'm done most of my Christmas shopping.

Thank you all for both the patience and for reading, and I hope you stay safe and have a great day!! <3

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim made himself busy with prep work. There was a lot to do if he was going to rob the Iceberg Lounge without drawing attention to himself or his ongoing operations, and the last thing his burgeoning medical business needed was Cobblepot taking an interest. That was asking for a shootout or something, and Tim couldn't be sure none of the tech from the drug lab *wouldn't* shoot if provoked. Tim had zero interest in getting tied to gang violence.

He also had a very limited time to get the supplies and supervisor to what he reluctantly had to admit was *his* drug lab, or the techs would almost assuredly go elsewhere and Tim would be back to square one. Or square one point five, maybe, since he'd hopefully at least still have the location. And the equipment. Maybe square one and three quarters?

But he was getting off topic, a sure sign that he needed to get something to eat sooner than later.

Deciding to kill multiple birds with one batarang, Tim headed to the Vecellios' pizzeria. Some of the kids were coming over later, he may as well be prepared with food when they got there. And Redbird always enjoyed the walk.

The girls had been staying with Maggie since he rounded them up, but they seemed determined to spend as much spare time as possible at his place. Not that he minded, it was cute seeing Marianne try and help her sister sound out words on his crummy little sofa. Luke had insisted he needed it, apparently to "make the place less pathetic," roping Jason into helping him get it up the stairs, though they had eventually gotten it stuck in the doorway. *That* had been a funny afternoon, coming back from a round of his in-person IT visits to find

one kid trapped in his apartment while the other desperately tried to kick a lime green couch out of the way.

Tonight was a dinner night, something Tim tried to have at least three times a week, where the chipmunks could bring anyone they wanted and Tim would feed whoever showed up. There were a few regulars at this point, kids Tim could say were starting to hesitantly trust him that he hoped might use the safe houses once they were finished. He wished it could be more regular, but as he got busier and busier, Tim started spending more and more evenings out and about, and he didn't want to make promises to any of the kids that he couldn't keep.

The kids had, in many ways, been a godsend, though Tim still felt a little guilty asking them to do him favours. With the extra hands, helping with carefully monitored construction and picking up supplies from locals, he had gotten two of the safe houses all but ready for habitation, all he needed to do at this point was figure out was utilities. Tim was still debating acquiring them ‘legally’ so he could just connect them to the city, or whether it would be worth getting them up on an independent system. It would be more work, but it would make them safer and more reliable in the event of blackouts or, years down the line, the Quake.

Tim didn't like to think about just how badly that had screwed over the street kids. If there was something he could do to give them half a chance to survive that, where before they had starved and frozen and *died* , he would get it done.

The bell over the door announced his presence, and Sam Vecellio looked up from the magazine she had been reading at the counter. There was still something a little guarded about her whenever he came by, something a little disbelieving, like there was no way Tim was real or really there or... something. But there was also something that seemed a little hopeful, and Tim was more than a little curious to find out what exactly she was hoping for.

But he had enough mysteries and puzzles on his plate, no need to start poking his nose into people's personal lives. If she figured out what it was she wanted, she could tell him in her own time. Or not at all.

"Afternoon, Redbird, Alvin. What do you want?" Whatever it was that was bothering her, it sure had never softened her customer service, so at least there was that.

Tim raised an eyebrow and grinned, a little sharp, a little amused, all mischief. Maybe a different approach would get her to mellow out. "Pizza, of course. Why else would I be here if not to feed the hordes that invade my apartment in the hopes they'll leave me alone?"

Sam snorted. "You'd need an exterminator to get them out at this point. What'll it be then?"

The chipmunks had eclectic taste in pizza, if Tim was being generous. Not that he had any room to judge, apparently. Though he had managed to convince Grandma Vecellio to add artichoke hearts to the menu, since he ordered so much from here, which he considered a win if nothing else. So he ordered the combination of crimes against pizza that his kids would demand, paid what he was still suspicious was a discounted price, despite telling them to charge him normally, and settled back to wait. He'd put the extra cash in the tip jar when Sam wasn't looking.

Three weeks. He had given himself what could very well be an impossible timeline on acquisitions, and he wished he could go back and give himself more time. Finding contacts, earning their trust, making an order, getting a delivery; all of those things took time that he couldn't afford. Not that he could have reasonably asked the techs to wait longer than that.

So, if he couldn't go get an official supply chain set up in time, what

could he do instead?

Well, there were chemical supplies coming into Gotham every day, and surely some of them would be what Tim needed. And there were only a few ways shipments of any decent size could get into the city.

Plane, train, boat.

Gotham had one major airport for commercial flights, and two additional and much smaller airports that were for goods. Mostly high value goods that needed to be transported under specific conditions. Could be a good source for what he needed, but that would involve robbing an airport. Not only was that risky, but there were more than enough cameras *everywhere* that the odds of someone getting a decent image of Tim were too far above zero to be comfortable.

So maybe in his own time that would be viable, but not here. Not now.

Trains, then. While most of the rail industry nearby was monopolized by Bludhaven (and *god,* Bludhaven was still standing, was still whole, Tim couldn't even *begin* to think about that), there were still a fair number of rail yards across Gotham. Most of them were run by different people or companies, with only an awkward sort of cohesion between them. Not impossible to find what he was looking for, but it would require visiting almost every yard individually, and there was no good way to transport anything off a train to the lab. Tim would have to steal a van, or something similar.

Doable, but man would it suck if he had to do that.

Which left boats. Which, really, Tim should have started with. He already had an in at the nearest harbour, hell he could look at the

next month's deliveries and manifests *tonight* if he wanted to. And since he had access to the harbour master's computer... It sure would be a shame if there was some sort of system error that resulted in a delivery of chemicals being made to a different warehouse than normal, wouldn't it?

Ding ding ding, it looked like Tim had a winner.

Now all he had to do was figure out who he could find that would be willing to keep an eye on the operations books and occasionally the floor. It would have to be someone he could trust not to screw him over, or at least someone he had something on so they wouldn't risk it.

Correction, he also still needed to talk to some of the local pharmacies about offering his product as a cheaper alternative, though he should probably wait to do that until after he actually had something to show them.

Redbird interrupted his musing, barking once as Sam emerged from the back with a stack of five boxes and setting them on the counter. "Order of five terrible pizzas, ready to go."

"They're not terrible, you just have no taste," Tim laughed, despite the fact they definitely were all terrible.

"I don't know why Grandma let's you ask for those crimes in the first place, normally you'd be out on your ass for even suggesting half of that," her tone was dismissive, but the tension that normally hung in her posture had relaxed an increment.

"What can I say, I can be convincing," Tim shrugged, scooping up the pizzas as Redbird would around his legs, apparently trying to trip him. "And I'm sure it doesn't hurt that I'm a regular."

Sam scoffed. "Sure, that's it. Definitely has nothing to do with what you did to those bruisers, or you palling around with fucking Killer Croc of all people."

Tim did not wince, but he was internally cringing. He kind of deserved that. "Look, Jones is pretty alright, all things considered. It's not like it's his fault he looks like that."

Sam was unimpressed. "But it is his fault he fucking *eats people.* "

Even Redbird was looking at him with big imploring eyes. She had refused to get close to him until after his third shower post-sewer, and even then she had been antsy. Thankfully Luke had been there to calm her down.

Less thankfully, Luke had taken one look at the tears in his hoodie and the scratches running up and down his forearms, and called Maggie. Maggie had, in turn, let the girls know that Tim was still an idiot, and all of them were in the process of trying to bully him into going to the clinic to get the wounds checked out. They weren't even that deep, and after the last infection, Tim had basically bathed them in disinfectant.

It'd be fine. No need to bother Leslie over little flesh wounds like that.

"Yeah, I can't argue with that one. But I'm sure he ate normal food at one point, there's no real reason he can't just go back to that. Raw person *can't* taste good, I refuse to live in that world." Tim shrugged.

"So what's the plan with that, gonna adopt him too?"

Tim blinked. "The only person I've adopted is Redbird here. The kids are more like weird stray cats that I fed once and now won't leave me alone. But no, I'm not going to try and adopt a fully grown man. If he wants help with something that doesn't involve eating people, well. We'll see."

"So," Sam hummed considerately. "Is there anyone who could ask for help with something that you'd turn down?"

"It'd really depend what they're asking for, Sam," Tim said. "I'm not gonna go around hurting people just because someone else wanted it done, but if it's reasonable and it'll make a positive difference in their life... I'd have to see."

"Hm. Well, I'll see you next time you get too sick of the slop you call cooking and come looking for real food. Tell the chipmunks I said hi."

"Lies and slander, I can cook just fine! But cooking for an undefined number of hooligans is something else entirely," Tim shot back. He wasn't above admitting he missed being able to banter with someone. The kids and Maggie were important to him, but it was nice to be able to just have fun with someone close to his own age.

Tim would give his left arm to talk to Kon right now.

But those were unproductive thoughts, and Tim had valuables to hide before his apartment was open to the public for the evening.

As far as Tim could tell, it had become something of a game amongst the chipmunks, to see who could manage to steal something from the apartment without him noticing. They didn't go for anything

important, thank goodness, but Tim was constantly having to pickpocket back his meager cutlery or cups, or even the weird little plastic comes-with-the-meal toys Luke kept giving him. No one had managed to get anything out the door yet, and Tim intended to keep it that way.

It was a bit of a juggling act to get his door open with his hands full and an eager dog trying to stand on his feet whenever he stood still for too long, but Tim managed it, and set the pizzas on the kitchen table. It was currently covered in planning documents, a printed blueprint of the Iceberg Lounge's floor plan (Tim was fairly certain it wasn't accurate, since it was from his own time and there was no way Cobblepot hadn't made any renovations for so long, but it was a place to start), and his franken-computer that still lived partially in his cupboards. Turned out local tech was still firmly in the "needs a lot of space or it'll overheat and hate you" period of design for the most part.

All of that got tucked again, some of it under the sink, some of it back in the oven (though that had bit him in the ass twice already, where one of the kids had turned on the oven to preheat at his instructions without checking it for anything inside and they had ended up melting several components), and most of it that was mobile went to his room. The kids were generally good about staying out of there, unless they had broken in specifically to wake him up.

Apparently being a reliable source of food got him *some* privacy rights.

As if summoned by his thoughts, his front door swung open with a creak that he couldn't bring himself to fix for security reasons, both his and the kids. Tim had yet to find anyone in Crime Alley who would trust a door that opened silently.

“Weird guy! We're here and if you don't have food ready we're going to eat you instead!” That would be Luke. Tim gave it maybe five minutes before he descended on Redbird and tried to monopolize the puppy cuddles for the evening.

Layla wouldn't make it easy for him, but the competition would keep them both busy and Redbird would end the evening as a puddle of fuzzy and snuggly goo, and Tim certainly wasn't complaining about that. She could get restless, especially with all the time she spent cooped up when he was out of the house, and any opportunity to play was important.

Speaking of, the door across the hall cracked open, and two little heads peeked out, eying the entrance to Tim's apartment. Marianne tended to like to scope out who was coming for dinner before letting her sister leave Maggie's apartment, and Tim could respect the cautiousness. It might just save their lives one day.

Tonight, Jason had brought a trio of kids around his own age. One taller than him with shaggy hair, probably cut it themself at some point and had let it grow since then. They were thin, but not too dangerously so, which either meant good things or very very bad ones. Maybe they had found a safe way to feed themself.

Tim wouldn't bet on it though.

The second kid was fairly small, only a little taller than Luke, but the angles on their face told Tim they were probably older than they looked. Their hands were stuffed in their pockets and they seemed jittery, like they were searching for the other shoe before it could drop and crush them. Tim wondered what Jason had said to convince them to come, if they were this nervous about it.

Or maybe they were just that desperate.

The third and final kid that Jason was not so subtly herding towards the kitchen table where the pizza was, looked like they were at the

end of their rope. Their knuckles were split and bruised, and there were splashes of discolouration across their jawline. It was always harder to precisely peg the stage of healing of a bruise on darker skin, but Tim would tentatively say they were a day or two old. It looked like their nose had been broken and poorly set a handful of times. Mostly, though, they just looked tired.

Tim had a pretty good guess why exactly these kids were homeless, and it made his blood boil.

Best to start softly, then.

"Pizza is for everyone, so please do try and share, if you want to take some with you when you leave that's fine, I can give you some paper towel to wrap it in or something. No need to introduce yourselves or even talk to me, but just so you know who I am, my name is Alvin and my pronouns are he-him or they-them. If you want to play with Redbird, please be careful, she can get skittish around new people," Tim said it all with a careful neutrality, not looking too hard at any of the kids, and instead lingering by his sink so the kids could have first crack at the food.

It wasn't like they were going to eat all of his pizza anyways, after all. When Luke had found out about the artichoke hearts he had been quite convincingly feigned betrayal.

And sure enough, Luke had left Redbird alone for now, elbowing his way towards the table with all the grace of a staggering foal. Still, it *did* work.

"No way am I getting stuck with slimy *vegetables* on my pizza," he said, digging an elbow into Jason's side to try and squeeze past him.

Jason, of course, put a hand in his face and shoved him away, totally not deliberately towards the table. “Hey! Manners, brat. Keep those bony knives to yourself!” He could pretend all he wanted, but Tim knew he had a soft spot for Luke, and just about any other kid in need.

Not that Tim could blame him without being a massive hypocrite.

"If you don't eat at least some vegetables you'll get scurvy and then where will we be?" Tim asked, amused that as Luke and Jason devolved closer and closer to wrestling, the other three kids had begun piling pizza onto paper plates. "You really want me to have to take you to Doc Leslie and get chewed out for not feeding you properly?"

Luke looked up from where he was clinging to Jason like a koala to stick his tongue out. "If it makes you actually go to the clinic again then *yes* ."

Across the hall, it looked like Marianne had decided to take her chances for the sake of some good food, and she and Layla scurried over. Layla, of course, ignored the table entirely, intent on stealing Redbird before Luke noticed they had arrived, and Marianne sidled past Luke and Jason, ending up closer to the other kids as she picked slices for both her and her sister.

The new kids seemed a little startled at the new additions, the one with the bruises flinching backwards, nearly dropping their pizza. In contrast, the kid covered in bruises shifted forward to get between Marianne and the others. The twitchy one didn't actually seem to visibly react, just staring a little too hollow-eyed for Tim's tastes.

If nothing else, their responses told Tim they'd been together for a while, to have such established dynamics among them.

Marianne seemed to read the tension, side-eyeing the others as she picked the peppers off of one piece of pizza, making a little pile on the side of her plate. "I'm Marianne, she-her. That's my sister Layla. We've been here a while. The pizza doesn't stop being gross, but at least it's food."

There was a moment of silence, where Tim pointedly watched Layla pretend to tackle Redbird. Even Jason and Luke paused in their roughhousing to see where this was going. Tim had no doubts that if someone *did* try to start something they would both do their best to end it before anyone got hurt.

They were good kids like that.

"Leaf," the twitchy one finally said, glancing briefly at Tim. "He-him."

With that, the tension drained a little from the room, not quite gone, but like someone had poked a hole in the plug at the bottom of the tub, and now it could start to go places.

Still, that didn't mean Tim missed the way one of those hands darted out of a pocket to swipe one of the plastic cups off the table.

Idly, Tim wondered if Jason had told them about the game before bringing them over, or if it was just a matter of sticky-fingered habit. He would bet it was some combination of both.

Jason took the moment of distraction to get a better hold on Luke and throw him onto the armchair. Then he turned back to the kitchen, scooping a few pieces of a bastardized Hawaiian onto his plate. "I told you, Alvin's cool, if kind of weird."

The fighty kid narrowed their eyes a little, hands flexing. "Not the only thing you said about him."

Tim raised an eyebrow, though he couldn't say he was surprised. It only made sense Jason would have said more if he was trying to convince a group clearly used to rejection to trust enough to enter a stranger's home.

"If you have questions, you can always ask. I'll do my best to be honest, though that might mean honestly telling you I'm not going to answer a question if I think it's unreasonable."

The shaggy one turned their full attention to him, clearly trying to size him up. Tim made no attempt to project anything in particular. He knew what he was hoping would come of this encounter, but he wasn't going to manipulate children to get it.

"My name is Lucy. They-them," they said, like a challenge, just daring Tim to say something about their largely feminine presentation and name. As if that was the problem he was going to have, rather than the deep concerns over his suspicion of underage prostitution.

God Tim hoped he was wrong about that one. He wasn't holding his breath, though.

"Nice to meet you, Lucy," he said easily, not moving from where he was leant against the counter, in part to avoid pressuring anyone, and also to make sure no one came too close to where he was keeping things he couldn't afford getting stolen.

Just in case, and all that.

"Jason said you're setting up places for people to stay. Why?" the fighty one asked, offering no kind of introduction. That was fine, keeping their name to themselves wasn't a bad survival instinct either.

He could shrug here, try and seem casual, but that wasn't really what Tim wanted to convey. This was serious, and he was asking kids who had lost homes before to trust him to give them shelter. That wasn't easy.

"Because I don't like the idea of kids on the street, especially with winter coming. Gotham gets fucking cold, and the last thing anyone needs is to be sleeping outside in that. If I can at least offer a warm place to sleep and shower, I'm going to do that." Honesty, openness. Tim didn't exactly like having to justify himself and his choices over and over again, but these kids deserved at least that much from him, from the world. “And it would be stupid to not at least try and get food in those places if I’m setting them up anyways. I’ve got a few agreements with local shops for supplies. Now I just need people to try them out and tell me what works and what doesn’t.”

There was a weighty pause, but Tim didn’t let it linger.

He turned his attention to Jason, picking his way across the space to join Layla by Redbird, taking one of the plates Marianne had filled with him as he passed the table, while he very casually plucked the cup from Leaf’s pocket and tucked it into his own. He offered Layla the plate, as he settled down beside Redbird on the floor. Immediately, Layla descended on it with all the fervor of a starving hyena.

“I know you were planning to swing by the grocers two blocks over at some point today, have you gotten around to that yet?”

Jason gave him a look that very clearly said, *I see what you're doing* . "Yeah, they said we could pick stuff up tomorrow around lunch time. Do you want it coming here or going straight to the one with an ice box?"

And with that they started talking shop, Jason telling Tim how things were in the shops he hadn't had the chance to visit in awhile, and letting him know there were a few deliveries ready to go whenever he wanted to pick them up, offering to do it himself if he was too busy.

That was a tempting prospect, if he could find a way for Jason to safely get supplies from stores to the various safehouses, that could be enough of a job to keep him busy and feeling useful without asking too much of him.

While they discussed the logistics of transporting that much food subtly to locations, Tim watched the new kids out of the corner of his eye. Every word exchanged seemed to set them a little more at ease, and they were making plenty of headway through the pizza.

Sooner rather than later, Layla finished her food and scampered back to Tim's side to commandeer Redbird. Of course, the second Luke saw what she was going for he abandoned his own plate to try and intervene.

The result was tiny elbows flying and an even tinier dog trying to lick every visible inch of skin she could get at. It was both ridiculously cute and surprisingly violent, but it seemed like they were having fun, so Tim sat back on his heels, content to watch them duke it out for the meantime.

Marianne had not-subtly-at-all engaged Lucy in conversation about Maggie's cooking, it sounded like, telling them all about her faulty oven and refusal to consider a microwave (Tim hadn't known

Maggie's oven didn't work well, he would have to look into getting that fixed or doing it himself depending on how old it was).

Although Leaf didn't join in, he watched the conversation attentively, picking at his fifth piece of pizza as if he didn't want to stop eating just yet. The fighty kid, on the other hand, hadn't stopped staring at Tim, even as he ate. Tim wasn't exactly comfortable with it, but he was used to being constantly watched by people a lot scarier than a desperate kid, so while the suspicion made his chest twist a little, he mostly ignored it.

With a general plan in place for the supply runs the next day, Jason turned to the other kid. "Do you want to come with me tomorrow? I could use the extra hands."

The kid jerked slightly, starling at being directly addressed, but still didn't take their eyes off of Tim. "I dunno, what's your boss got to say about that? Can't imagine he wants some street rats to know about his fancy little set-ups."

"I'm not Jason's boss. He doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to, and neither do you. And kids like you are *exactly* the kind of people I want to know about these places. I sure as hell won't be the one staying in them." Odds were still in the air as to whether Tim would be staying here *at all* , after all. Leaf's attention very clearly swapped from one conversation to the other, and now he was joining in on the 'Stare at Tim' game. "If you want to go with Jason on some errands, feel free. He usually comes here afterwards to tell me how things went over dinner, so you can join in there as well if you want. Or we can never see each other again. Your call."

Lucy, without breaking off from their discussion with Marianne, which had shifted to places to steal a microwave, reached across the table and flicked the fighty kid's ear, hard.

“Ow! Don’t be a dick, Lucy,” they snapped, finally looking away from Tim to glare at Lucy, who met their gaze coolly. “Okay, fine. I might give it a go. Maybe.”

Tim shrugged, reaching between flailing chipmunks to run a hand across one of Redbird’s silky ears. “Do what you think is best for you. You certainly don’t owe me anything. But if you ever need any help with anything, feel free to let me know and as long as you’re not asking me to kill anyone, I’ll do my best.”

That got him another suspicious squint, but after only a moment the kid settled back and chewed his pizza moodily.

A hard poke in his side pulled Tim’s attention away from the table, and he turned to meet Luke’s wide grin. He was missing one of his bottom canines, it had fallen out last week, and Layla was sitting on his back, stroking Redbird.

“Stop being useless, Weird Guy, and help me! She’s stealing our dog!” Luke was clearly trying to sound indignant, but his smile gave him away. Mostly he just sounded delighted.

Tim grinned back and scooped both them and the dog off the floor, laughing as they shrieked and Redbird scrabbled at his chest with her little claws. “Well maybe I’ll just steal all of you so Redbird stays mine by default.”

“But what about Maggie?” Marianne asked, a mischievous glint in her eye. “I don’t think she’d let you just steal her favourite kitchen assistant.”

“I’ll just have to steal her too,” Tim shrugged as much as he was able to without dropping anyone. Layla was attempting to work her way

onto his shoulders which probably wasn't going to go well. Tim didn't exactly have the broadest frame.

Jason piped up then. "But what about all the other people feeding us now? There's plenty of people willing to share something to eat if your name gets dropped. You don't get dibs anymore, Alvin."

"I'll steal the whole neighbourhood, then," Tim said without thinking. The thought made the easy heat in his chest *glow* . "I mean, who's going to stop me?"

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Of course, the warmth of a shared meal with people he cared about couldn't last forever.

Tim had a few criminals to go visit, after all.

The names the techs had given him were vaguely familiar, probably having been in some of the old records on the Batcomputer, but certainly not people he'd ever seen in his time on the streets. He would have expected it to be harder to track down someone running a drug lab, but Tim was starting to get the hang of the legwork of this time.

He started with the bar.

It was still a little funny to be walking into a place like that, given he was still a couple of years off being able to drink legally, some little part of him still snickering at how out of place he ought to have looked. Sure he replaced the jacket he lost in the sewer and washed

his hoodie, but damn if he wasn't a good six inches shorter than most of the patrons.

At least the bartender seemed to recognize him from last time he was here.

Tim headed straight to her.

"What've you got in the ways of beer?" he asked, hoping the answer would include something he recognized. Tim would be the first to admit that while he could talk pretentious wine nonsense at a gala, he didn't really know the first thing about alcohol. It was just too nasty to really get invested in.

"For you? Nothing," she said drily.

Tim raised an eyebrow. "Is this about the unfortunate business last time? Because they attacked me."

"Yeah, after you provoked 'em. You should be glad I'm not throwing you out already before you start something," she scoffed.

Odd. If she wasn't going to make him leave, why refuse to sell him anything? Or was it just the beer that was a no-go?

"Alright," Tim said, narrowing his eyes a touch. "Then what *can* I get from you?"

The bartender grinned, toothy and sharp, and not particularly clean.

Tim would bet she hadn't been to a dentist in at least the last five years. "Depends what you're willing to pay for. But since you weren't here for a drink anyways, what is it you were looking for?"

Ah, politics. Tim had most certainly not missed this aspect of information networks and allies. If he could even call them that, at this point.

Fine, he could play ball.

"What are you willing to give to know what I want?" Tim asked, too casual to be anything but pointed. "I'm not giving you information to sell to someone else for nothing."

That got him a laugh, a little surprised but still mean. Not like he could expect anything else just yet. "So you've done this song and dance before. And you're certainly not local, despite the accent. No one like you just decides to do this crap one day. No one knows you, and no one's worked with you before. And you've been making noise in a few places. I'm sure we can come to a trade both of us will be able to take home."

Tim hadn't been looking for a mind game when he walked in, but he couldn't say he was sorry. He had missed battles of wits and tricks.

Maybe he should track down Nygma when he had the chance. Some high-stakes snakes and ladders might be in order.

“Maybe,” Tim said, humming noncommittally. “I’m just looking for a few people. Don’t suppose that’s the kind of thing you’d be willing to tell me at a low cost and keep their identities to yourself.”

Half the bar was surreptitiously watching them at this point. The layout may mean they probably couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, not at this volume anyways, but if people were taking an interest in Tim and what he got up to, then he might already be in trouble.

"Not for cheap, no. But I'm sure you know a thing or two that could convince me to keep things to myself for at least a few days," she all but purred, leaning further over the bar, something sharp in her eyes.

That was probably a lie. Tim was too new and too young to get any kind of guarantee about secrecy, though she might pretend whoever she told got the information from someone else. As if Tim was dumb enough to tell multiple people. Maybe she thought he was.

He'd have to disabuse her of that notion.

"Lot of maybes and vagueness for a transaction," Tim shook his head, tapping a quick rhythm on the counter to hide the listening device he stuck to the underside of the counter. It was smaller than anything this era had, and Tim was taking something of a risk leaving this here where it could be found, but Tim was betting on this being before regular bug-checks "So unless you're going to let me buy a drink, I think I'll have to head out."

The bartender made no move to stop him as he left, and Tim wasn't surprised. He'd make some progress elsewhere, and let her simmer for a week or so and then give this whole thing another go and see if she was willing to be a bit more cooperative then. If not, well. Tim would figure something out. It's what he was best at, after all.

And anyways, some of the people he was looking for were probably trackable through other means. Maybe he ought to make a quick stop at a utilities customer service center, see if he could find their names

and addresses on a register.

In the meantime, he really needed to take a trip to the pharmacy he had his eye on, and if he happened to be listening to conversations in My Alibi while he walked that was no one's business but his own.

Chapter End Notes

Well hey there. I hope everyone had a nice holiday season and aren't doing too poorly a week into the new year. Its been a little over a month this time around, but in my defense I wrote other things in the meantime!! They're two Assassin's Creed fics and they are shamelessly self indulgent. Classes are about to start up again, so we'll see if that helps my productivity or not. Its honestly a toss up.

As is this, actually. I wanted to write scheming and the kids, and they just kind of Took Over. I intended for the section at the end to keep going in this chapter, but this thing is already over 5k long? so I elected to end things there and we can get to All That next time. But Tim has the makings of a plan! Mostly because I actually kind of have an outline for the rest of the fic, which makes that easier. I'm getting pretty excited about it, all things considered, even though a lot of stuff is still a good ways off.

You may have noticed the updated rating, and that's in large part because of both the reference to underage prostitution in this chapter and some more unsavoury things to come. I just don't want to mislead anyone? But if anything really triggering comes up, there'll be some kind of warning, I promise.

In podcast news, this weeks episode was us proposing characters for the final Super Smash Bros Ultimate Fighter's Pass, and it was pretty fun. Interestingly, we recorded this all the way back in November, before a few announcements had come out, which makes a couple choices Very Interesting. Here's a link if you want to check that out https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPjNzKrxIYU

Also, this fic has passed 1000 kudos?? And thinking about that makes me nearly cry??? The support from you guys has been unbelievable and I'm so thankful for every single person that reads this?? Who knew a screen full of numbers could make you so happy (maybe mathematicians know something we don't).

Thank you, personally and specifically you the person reading this right now, for taking the time out of your day for my ridiculous fic <333 Have a wonderful week and I'll see you all again At Some Point

Edit: Okay, I didn't want to make a thing of it, but three times is a pattern so look. I wanted to include queer kids being treated well by an adult who cares so I wrote it. That's literally it. That's why they're here and why the interaction went like that. There's a lot of this fic that I try to make at least vaguely period accurate, but this is also my thing I do for fun and at the end of the day I'm writing this to my preferences first and foremost. If you don't like it that's a you problem and I don't really want to hear about it. If you don't like the directions I'm taking things you can just Stop Reading. Close the window. Go bitch to your friends about fanfic authors who care too much about pronouns and gender. Do whatever you need to, but leave me out of it.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim hadn’t been expecting convincing the pharmacy to take his product to be easy, but that didn't mean he enjoyed having to give a bunch of half-truths to get what he wanted. Even when it was for a good cause, it always weighed on him just a little. Not exactly because he thought lying was *wrong* , but because it always became yet another thing to keep track of, another story to know every detail of. Sometimes it was fun to play whatever part was needed of him by circumstance, but sometimes Tim wished he could just sit down without some part of him considering how his persona's would respond to this or that, just in case he needed to be ready for it one day.

At least these days he could be relatively consistent across contexts, letting the Crime Alley edge settle against his tongue and shoulders like it belonged there. And like Jason wouldn't immediately deck him for pretending to be one of them when he wasn't.

The bell over the door chimed his entrance, the same pharmacist he had seen when picking up his prescription some time ago behind the counter. Also there, curiously enough, was the woman she had been talking to. Despite the noise of his entrance, neither woman paid him any mind. She was leaning forward, one arm propped between them while the other tapped a rhythm of some kind. The pharmacist was leaning forward as well, just a little, arms crossed over her chest and grinning. A little paper bag sat on the counter, not from home, so it was probably either an under the table transaction, or, more likely, a forgotten lunch brought from home.

"If you want me to drop by on my lunch breaks, you could have just asked me y'know," the woman, Tim vaguely thought her name was Suchi, laughed, soft and low. "No need to keep leaving your lunch at home."

The pharmacist pretended to turn up her nose, giving herself away with her unbreakable smile. "Maybe I'm just forgetful. Not everything is about you Suchi."

Heck yeah, that was another point for Tim’s ongoing memory scorecard.

Tim didn't really want to interrupt them, but he was kind of on a schedule here.

"Can I have a moment of your time?"

Two heads snapped towards him, sudden and sharp and like they'd been caught doing something worse than flirting.

"Yes, of course," the pharmacist said, tension snapping her spine straight and her hands tightening around her elbows. "What can I do for you?"

Suchi, interestingly made no move to leave, just stepping out of the way slightly to give Tim access to the counter. He kept his distance, leaving a few feet between them.

"I'd like to make you an offer, and you're going to want to hear it." Tim was careful with his tone. Cocky and confrontational would get him nowhere, but he needed to sound confident or there was no way she would take him seriously. Especially given what he was here to do.

Sure enough, she narrowed her eyes at him. "This is a pharmacy. Unless you're scum enough to try and push for protection money from us, there's nothing you can say that I want to hear."

"Not even if I can offer medications for cheap that you can sell well below market prices?"

More suspicion, a little fear, but out of the corner of his eye Tim saw his ticket to success; Suchi's attention was caught and she looked desperate.

Based on her slightly too-quick breathing, the sweet scent Tim was fairly sure wasn't a perfume, and the way she had occasionally been licking her lips , Tim would bet she had been rationing her insulin again and was dangerously hyperglycemic. There was no way a young mother like her *wanted* to take the risk, but if it was her well-being or feeding her child, Tim understood what choice she would make. What choice any good parent would make.

Even still, she was scared. Probably scared of what would happen to her kid when she inevitably paid the toll of her gamble. Assuming she lived, she would be saddling herself with ungodly medical debts, debts that would make affording her medication even harder. Debts her kid may end up having to pay off.

If Tim could convince her to take a chance on him, he could prove himself to the tech and then he'd have his in.

"If you're offering something below market value, I can only assume it's because it's crap or laced with enough shit to make someone an addict off the first dose," the pharmacist snapped, drawing his attention back to her despite his gaze never wavering. "I will not be complicit in some back-alley bullshit that will get my clients killed."

Tim nodded approvingly. "Good. If you had agreed easily it would be obvious you were crooked. I'm not gonna lie to you; this is a new project of mine. The way I see it, one of the biggest problems with selling drugs is how often your customers get stupid and die. Can't sell shit to a corpse. But if you're selling drugs to keep them alive instead? They'll take your product until they don't need it, and if it works they'll tell their sick friends about you giving you a consistent customer base that isn't going to drop dead so long as you're actually selling good meds. And there's always someone else suffering around here."

He watched his words hit their targets well enough. The pharmacist couldn't deny his logic, even if it wasn't the kind of thing she was used to hearing from apparent drug dealers. And to the left, Suchi had shifted her weight to edge closer about an inch or so. Not a lot, too afraid to give away her interest, but not willing to miss a word.

Hook.

"The medical drug industry is an untapped market, currently dominated by white collar assholes and smugglers that mostly sell to white collar assholes. Way I see it, if I can get the stronghold on that, and keep the selling firmly away from traditional drug deals I can appeal to a whole bunch of people who just don't want to die. And guess what? I don't want them to die either."

The tech was fraught with tension now, her glare not abating, but leaning forward despite herself. Suchi wasn't even pretending not to be listening now.

Line.

Tim rolled his shoulders, like he was annoyed but trying to work through it. Wouldn't do for it to be obvious he was getting exactly what he wanted. "Look, I can arrange to get you some samples that you can take a look at yourself to check they're clean, and you can think about it. I'm still fine-tuning everything on the production line anyways. Any requests for what you'd like to see?"

Finally, the glare broke, Suchi looking wide-eyed to her friend, and the pharmacist meeting her gaze. There was a moment of communication only possible to those who knew each other intimately, who trusted each other, and then both looked to Tim.

"If you can get me some samples of ravicti, actimmune, and insulin, I'll take a look at those. But if there turns out to be even *one* part per million of something shady in there, not only will I call the cops, but I will personally make sure no pharmacy in Gotham will ever sell you so much as a *cough drop* again," the tech threatened, even as Suchi looked on the edge of tears.

Close enough.

Tim did not smile, absolutely not, but he should probably get out of there before he did a fist pump or something. Instead, he nodded like the professional he was dammit, and slipped his hands in his pockets. "I can do that. Give me a week and I'll be back with some gifts for you. We can negotiate the rest of our working relationship later."

He glanced between the two women, clearly in need of a moment to themselves, and tipped his head. "You two have a good day."

As Tim turned away, he watched the movement behind him in the glass of the door. Suchi surged towards the counter and took one of the tech's hands in her own, pressing her forehead into it. This was none of his business, the image sliding away as he pushed open the

door and stepped out into the afternoon.

But hey, now he had a place to start his sales from. All he needed now were the actual drugs.

Progress.

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When he started as Robin, the Iceberg Lounge had been more than a little intimidating.

Sure it was supposedly just a club full of rich people, but it was also one of the most stable Rogue strongholds in Gotham, full of highbrow criminals, and not the kind of place Tim could easily get into. He could swing his babyface at some bars, if he had the right attitude and disguise, but the Iceberg Lounge had *standards* . Not exactly *good* standards, but standards nonetheless. Without the appearance of money or power or danger, there was no way through the door, and there was no way Tim could swing that without looking like a little kid playing dress-up in his dad's suit.

At least, not until he got old enough for tailored suits to be worth the investment. And even that was only if you ignored Cassie's teasing comments about that one magazine article for WE Tim had been forced to do.

Apparently he had looked moments away from being shoved in a filing cabinet.

But as Tim had moved on with his career, the Iceberg Lounge had

become something of a fun challenge. How many times could he block all of their orders of cherries that were used to smuggle bullets? Could he buy a drink without getting asked for his ID? Who here was dumb enough to hire him for a theft? None of those missions had been exactly *approved* by Bruce, but he had turned a blind eye so long as Tim never did anything too dramatic and never altered the gang political scene.

No one needed anymore gang wars than Gotham produced naturally.

So it wasn't like Tim was entirely unfamiliar with the Lounge, from a vigilante perspective, nor from a shenanigans perspective, but he had never dared to try anything of this scale before. A straight up robbery? That kind of thing was more Catwoman's speed than his, and if he wasn't careful he'd end up getting stopped by Batman and Robin themselves.

Though that did depend on whether or not Cobblepot's systems were at all linked to the police networks that would allow, say, a silent alert to summon them to the scene. After all, Batman couldn't stop a crime he didn't know about, and Tim liked to think he was still anonymous enough that no one was going to be able to predict his movements, if they even knew he existed at all.

It hadn't been as easy as he would have liked, acquiring a suit up to the Iceberg Lounge's standards to get himself through the front door. He'd had to take pieces from half a dozen charity stores and thrift shops before he could put together something halfway respectable. Between that and the knife and gun he was only making most of an effort to hide, Tim looked like a young criminal looking to move up in the world by picking up work from Penguin or those in his circle.

As if Tim would ever work for him. He had standards too, even if they had also slipped somewhat lately.

Hopefully no one would notice that the pinstripes on his pants were a sixteenth of an inch closer together than those on his jacket. On any other job, in any other bar, he could use someone pointing it out as grounds to pick a fight and earn some credibility, but this time around it would just draw attention he was very much not looking for.

Walking in through the doors after flashing his ID and dropping a bribe he may very well regret later to the doorman, Tim was hit with a weird wave of nostalgia and pity.

The Iceberg Lounge was, for a lack of a better word, kind of tacky. Overly gaudy and determined to flaunt the trappings of wealth, this place had clearly yet to see the occasional gunfights or Batman raids that forced Cobblepot to be at least a little bit practical when planning his decor. Sure the glass would always be a staple, mimicking icicles and penguins and other arctic and antarctic life, but some of these sculptures looked a breath from breaking. They were just *asking* to have someone thrown through them.

Tim made his way around the room, doing a circuit that wasn't anxious but was clearly just a touch uncomfortable. No one looking for work here for the first time would go anywhere near any of the groups in discussion before getting the lay of the place, or at least the place as far as the eye could see. There were certainly enough pillars breaking sight lines and short stairways distorting size and distance to make the place feel both sophisticated and a little bit like a fun house.

Tim was pretty sure he remembered curb-stomping some goon's arm against some of those stairs once upon a time. And also hiding behind one of those pillars to avoid getting shot.

If nothing else, all the marble provided decent cover.

Complete lack of subtlety aside, the set-up wasn't bad, Tim decided as

he rounded the back wall, certainly classier than anything else in town at this point, but he couldn't help but see all of the improvements Cobblepot could make, some based on what he would eventually do, and others based simply on what Tim knew would soon be popular. This version of the Iceberg Lounge just seemed so... Quaint, almost. Small-minded in its grandiosity.

At least the clientele was still suitably terrifying.

There was the usual assortment of fancy dresses and expensive suits, actual legitimate Gothamite upper crust (no matter how oxymoronic that felt as an identifier) mixing with up and coming mobsters and their trophy wives, a couple cases where it was very clear who was pulling the strings of a conversation based on body language alone. There were sycophants scattered around, hoping to schmooze their way into someone's pocket, and there were those who looked like the kind of person Tim was pretending to be, young and hungry and ready to hurt people for prestige and payment.

No sign of Cobblepot, which was either a good thing or a bad one.

He might be out on business, legal or otherwise, which would be a weight off of Tim’s back, or he might be in his office, in which case accessing the vault was going to end up a whole lot more complicated.

Tim really didn't feel like dealing with exploding wind-up penguins tonight. They'd singe the hell out of his suit, he just knew it.

Security was discreet, some of them with bulky earpieces and clearly above-board, and others Tim was fairly certain were on Cobblepot's payroll who were lounging around and were not so subtly armed.

If things went south, Tim was going to have a hell of a time getting

out of here.

The layout was, thankfully, still similar enough to the plans from the future that Tim was confident the vault hadn't moved. While Cobblepot had certainly had enough money in the years between to construct an entirely new one, it probably wasn't worth the potential closures to the club and the lost revenue therein to do that kind of renovation.

Not to mention Tim liked to think either he or Oracle would have noticed those kinds of products being bought and sold under Cobblepot's name if it had happened any time during his own tenure.

Therefore, the vault was in all likelihood through the back and in the basement, hopefully still hidden behind the secret door that wasn't actually marked on any plans. Tim wondered if Cobblepot was cliche enough to use a bookcase to hide it.

Though, given how far back all this was, maybe that cliche wasn't as overused yet? Tim would have to find out. And possibly look up uses of the trope in fiction and real-life cases later.

Later.

Hidden entrance or not, there was bound to be at least one guard if Tim's admittedly pretty vague guesses about how much was actually in there were anywhere close to correct.

Though maybe Tim would get lucky and Cobblepot would be paranoid enough to not want anyone knowing about the vault at this point? He could hope, anyways.

The trick, firstly was to actually g *et* into the back of the club without getting his face beaten by a guard or just straight up shot by one of the less than subtle goons.

Eying the people moving in and out as he made his way to the bar, Tim settled to wait while considering the staff uniforms. They were just the simple button up and vests, with plain black slacks. Unfortunately Tim wasn't in a three-piece or this would be even easier, but he already had some idea how to go about this.

The bartender finally turned to him, the kind of customer service mask in place that was glued so tightly in place it was a surprise he could even blink. "What can I get for you," there was a pause, like the next word was being physically dragged from his throat. "Sir?"

Tim knew he looked a little lowbrow, but this reaction still seemed like a bit much. Maybe he hadn't done as good a job as he thought getting the smell of thrift stores off something? Or maybe this guy was actually better at his job than he looked, and had noticed Tim's dress shoes were *at best* third hand.

Whatever. As long as he thought Tim was here for business, he wouldn't say anything. Probably.

He ordered white rum, charging it to a credit card that was both entirely fraudulent and also had a magnetic strip that would convince any machine to display the right messages anyways. Hopefully there would be a minute or so between transactions so the code could run its course with no one being the wiser. Either way, Tim ought to take his drink and move on.

The bartender watched him go for a moment, hands pausing in a way that would get him fired on a higher-paced night, and Tim had a bad feeling.

Rather than making his way directly towards where he planned to acquire the right vest, Tim decided to mingle a bit, see what scraps of rumour he could pick up and pretend to look for a job. At least until he stopped feeling the weight of the bartender's gaze quite so heavily.

Instead of the circles Tim had started with, he moved through the room in a half-spiral search, using the bar as the centre of his semi-circle while he lingered on the edges of conversations, throwing in tidbits and opinions about everything from what kind of hired help was worth the price and where the best champagne in Gotham could be found. It reminded him weirdly of galas with Bruce, except instead of a certified Bright Young Man, he was playing the role of enterprising lowlife.

At least none of the criminals were trying to pinch his cheeks.

Eventually, it felt like forever, but Tim was fairly certain it was only about half an hour, he felt the bartender get properly distracted. Which meant it was time to make his move as best he could.

Making his way towards the bathrooms, Tim surreptitiously poured some of his drink in a glass or two as he went, loosening his posture and gait accordingly. The other patrons didn't seem to notice, but it was obvious the wait staff had a fairly high level of training, and they picked up on his movements quickly enough. That meant they were probably used to seeing people lie with their physicality all the time, so Tim really had to sell it if he wanted this to work. He did his best to project as hard as he could the general sense that he wasn't *drunk* , oh no mister waiter sir or madam, he just wasn't used to alcohol this nice, is all. And he'd had a light dinner. He just wanted to take a moment or two to clear his head in the men's room, nothing to worry about, really. Maybe lean on a distant pillar for a second to get his bearings. Round it, a little, cutting off the rest of the room's view of him.

And then-

Whoops. Tim oh so unfortunately tripped on one of the steps at the base of the pillar, tipping forwards just enough for his flailing hand to peek out from behind the marble as he spilled the remaining half of his drink onto the floor, letting the trail spill towards him as he used the pillar to regain his balance.

Really, how *could* he be so clumsy.

Sure enough, the distinctive sound of the kind of work shoes staff like these wore, professional appearance, but soft-soled enough to make them a non-entity to most people's awareness and to prevent at least some of the ache that was inevitable from a long shift on their feet.

Wait. Wait. Wai-

A scoff, half under their breath with the certainty that no one was near enough to hear their disdain as whoever it was quickly crouched to mop up the spilled liquor.

Tim leaned backwards, away from the side of the pillar to ensure his shadow didn't cut into their view.

An awkward shift forwards, as the server stretched to reach the whole spill, and another small noise of irritation as they realized it stretched even further.

There was a brief glimmer of guilt for making this person's night harder than it needed to be, but Tim figured it was to help people, and hopefully one night wasn't going to be the end of their time working

here.

At last, the server rounded the pillar, still focused on the floor as they mopped up the last of the rum.

Just in time for Tim to wrap an arm around their throat and press his gloved hand against their mouth, squeezing with both as he pulled them to their feet, just hard enough that no sound could escape.

There was a struggle, of course there was, but Tim had all the leverage and he twisted so his back was to the pillar and he could hide them both behind it.

Hopefully no one saw just how abruptly they moved out of view.

Tim waited a couple of beats until the server had stopped moving, and was faintly relieved that it did appear to be a man. That made what exactly to do with this now unconscious body much easier.

Moving quickly, before anyone could wander over, Tim stripped his jacket and the server's vest, swapping them and buttoning both. His own hair was a little less well-kept than the server's so he licked his palm and swiped it back, hoping it would hold for at least a minute or two, while ruffling the other man's loose.

Rudimentary disguise accomplished, Tim carefully scooped the server's arm around his shoulder, sliding his own around the man's waist, and began closing the last of the distance to the bathroom, doing his best to keep his face averted without looking like that was what he was doing.

He was just a server escorting a drunken patron to the restroom to wait while he called security, nothing to see here.

Once out of the view of the general club, Tim weighed the benefits of stealing the man's pants.

His own pinstriped ones weren't *overly* obvious, but it did mean his outfit wouldn't hold up to much scrutiny, vest or no vest. And the server was only a couple of inches taller than Tim, he could absolutely roll up the pant legs and secure them with a discreetly placed pin.

On the other hand, the man wouldn't fit half as well into Tim's own pants, which would mean the second anyone found him they would know something was off simply because there was no way someone with such atrocious taste could get in here. And if he left him without *any* pants, that would be equally suspicious.

Unless he threw out the pants into the nearby waste bin and maybe people would assume he had spilled something on them? Or something?

It was the best Tim had, at least, so that's what he went with; carrying the man into a stall and propping him on the toilet, then shimmying out under the door and tossing the pants into the trash.

Tim glanced in the mirror as he did up his belt. God his hair was a mess. Grimacing, he rinsed his hands quickly, and took a couple of passes with them through it, trying to tame the locks into something that looked at least semi-respectable. He could *maybe* pretend to be harried and that the patron he dragged to the bathroom ruffled his hair, but if he looked too unprofessional he may very well get pulled aside for a dress code violation, which was the last thing he needed.

Good enough; he still looked a little like he'd had an unfortunate encounter with an unpleasantly handsy relative, but at least he could work with this. Not like he was planning on lingering anywhere anyways.

Heading back to the main room of the club, Tim scooped up his discarded glass and another couple of glasses left on banisters around the room. Hands full and a brisk pace ought to get him at least some leeway.

And just like he had hoped, Tim was able to sidestep a waiter opening up the doors to the back with a tray of food, catching the swing of one and holding it open with his elbow before slipping inside.

Despite never actually working a restaurant job, Tim had been in enough kitchens to know the drill here. Sort of. It helped that the Iceberg Lounge's kitchen was mostly for show since if anyone ordered anything beyond the basics they would often be actually referring to some sort of illegal activity they were hoping to propose. There were a couple of line cooks, an expo, and no sign of the head chef. The dish pit was empty beyond a handful of glasses and plates, so maybe one of the servers helped with that at the end of the night. Or a particularly unlucky security guard, maybe.

Tim deposited the glasses in a tray in the pit, and sidled down behind a row of counters.

Sneaky time.

The line cooks wouldn't see him even if he stood up, so long as he didn't draw attention to himself, but the expo was pacing while waiting for something to be finished. Tim would rather not take his chances on the woman's awareness, given that her entire job centered around attention to details.

Tim snuck past the counters, making his way to the stairwell at the back that ought to take him down to the office level where, hopefully, he'd find that secret entrance to the vault.

The stair door was locked, of course, but that was barely an obstacle. Tim had it open in seconds, though he spared a thought to hoping no one who knew this door was supposed to be locked came this way for a while.

Future problems, if it was going to come up at all.

As stairwells so often were, the whole space was echoey and weirdly lit. Not an obstacle for Tim, but that meant he would more than likely hear anyone coming.

One flight, two flights, and Tim came to another locked door. A quick glance through the glass confirmed the hallway on the other side was empty, at least for now, so he popped the door open and slipped inside.

This door locked automatically behind him.

There were only a couple of ways to go from here, the most obvious being the dark wooden doorway at the end of the hallway. That was probably Cobblepot's office, where he hopefully wasn't. Odds were pretty good the vault was in there, though Tim was kind of the opinion that was an objectively dumb place to put it.

What was to stop a fellow criminal walking in and holding Cobblepot at gunpoint and forcing him to open it? The cheap muscle upstairs? The locks on the stairs? Was all this a mistake of arrogance, or had

Tim missed something?

Focus.

There was no point getting caught up in hypotheticals while there was still a job to do. Tim could worry about all that later, and would simply stay on his guard until he was out of here.

It was a little tempting to check some of the doors leading up to the apparent office, but Tim wasn't inclined to risk walking in on someone and ruining this whole thing before he could even get a look at what he was here for.

This door didn't have a window, and its key hole wasn't from the 18th century so Tim couldn't just look through it. Time to take a chance, then.

Fancy door or not, this lock wasn't much more impressive than its predecessors and Tim had it open quickly enough. Bracing himself for just about anything on the other side, palming a flash pellet in his pocket, Tim opened the door.

Chapter End Notes

> Hey folks! Another long-ish chapter for you guys since its been a while and I also wanted to get at least part-way into the heist before wrapping things up. And then I found a fairly natural place to stop and its been a hot minute since I've updated, so We're Going With This.
>
> I actually don't have all that much to say about this one? I wrote it over the last few days when I finally got some free time in between classwork and I like the general vibe. Tim sure does get rambly though and I guess at this point I'm just going to lean into that. Hopefully its at least still interesting to read! I'm mostly enjoying finally getting somewhere in terms of plot.

In podcast news, we're doing Black History Month content for all of February and its a lot of fun! Our first episode was some highlights from Dwayne McDuffie's career that you can check out here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=706YnwIUXUU and this Wednesday we're talking about representation in the anime industry! We've also got planned an episode on some favourite black characters from across the nerdiverse, and a discussion of the John Boyega and Ray Fisher situations. So lots of fun stuff :)

Anyways, thanks for reading and I hope you're having a wonderful week!! <33

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Almost immediately, Tim knew he had made a mistake. As soon as the door cracked open, the sound of rustling papers crept through the gap and really, there was only one person it could be.

Great. This was going to go horribly.

Still, it would be even weirder to close the door now, since Tim wasn't going to bet on not being noticed. If he was very careful, Tim might be able to get Cobblepot out of the room, or at least away from his desk and the alarms he doubtlessly had there.

Time to improvise a bit.

Swinging the door open with all the confidence of a minimum wage employee with bad news to tell their boss, Tim stepped into the room and met Cobblepot's gaze as it snapped up from his paperwork.

"Who the hell are you? The help isn't allowed back here."

Tim tried what he hoped was a professional smile. He'd never done time in customer service, and he wasn't sure he could nail that particular kind of dead inside, but it was worth a shot. And in all likelihood, Cobblepot wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Not that it was enough to stop the blatant disdain on his face, presumably mortally offended by Tim's lackluster suit or something.

"One of the floor managers said to let you know that Maatubang was talking to Riscone, and that you'd like to know the details, sir."

This wasn't technically a lie, he had seen the two talking to each other earlier in the evening, but he hadn't been close enough to hear, certainly not worried about the gossip between two wanna-be gangsters while trying to look inconspicuous.

But that didn't mean he couldn't guess a thing or two about what their groups had been up to lately. Most of their types were pretty predictable, and Tim was getting increasingly familiar with the way small-time criminals who were grasping at power and trying to expand thought.

Sure enough, the offer of information on would-be rivals hit a note, Cobblepot's eyes gaining a light of slimy interest. "Oh, and what exactly were they discussing, boy?"

Now, to blame them for drugs, weapons, or scheming to muscle into Cobblepot's territory? Which could Tim potentially actually frame them for, if he needed to later?

Eenie, meenie, minie-

"They were talking in code, of course, sir, so I can't be certain on all of the details, but they were discussing a joint operation of some kind and they kept making references to a theater that they'd like to takeover operations of. Fraanchev Maatubang said he thought he could 'put on a better show than the fat bird' who was currently running it. Now I'm not the most cultured fella, I can admit sir, but none of the theaters I know of in the city are being run by any overweight women. I can only assume he was making reference to your *other* job, sir." Scheming. Easiest to fake evidence for without putting potentially dangerous paraphernalia anywhere near criminal

hands, and hopefully enough to get Cobblepot's blood up enough to get him moving. He hadn't gotten to where he was by letting other criminals anywhere near his empire, after all.

Though, Tim supposed, he might still be in that ruthless phase where he was building resources rather than protecting them quite so aggressively. In which case, the threat of anyone attempting to interfere might end up being even more potent.

Cobblepot's lips pulled back into a sneer. "Is that so? And did they say anything that gave a time frame for this 'operation?'"

What would be soon enough to warrant immediate attention, but not so soon as to put everything into lockdown?

"It sounded like they were planning to meet again in a few days time to finalize some details, 'dinner plans' they said. They referenced meeting up over Italian, so maybe they're looking to involve the Falcones?" Tim gave an awkward half-shrug, hoping to convey just a little bit of confusion at a topic that was clearly very outside of his job description. Get Cobblepot to dismiss him as a mildly useful, young fool.

Fingers drummed against the desktop, Cobblepot adjusting his monocle slightly as his eyes flickered back and forth like he was considering possibilities. Tim did his best to fade into the background as he thought.

After only a moment, Cobblepot's gaze snapped back to Tim, sharper now and with a faint edge of anticipation to his smirk. "Your manager was right to send this information to me. In exchange, I won't ask your name and get you fired for those abysmal shoes and that shameful haircut of yours. Get back to work."

So much for not going into any of those weird doors.

Tim dipped his head in an only a little awkward half-bow, and left the room.

There wasn't much time to lose, so Tim ducked into the first open room he found and hoped for the best.

Liquor storage. Shouldn't this door be locked? To stop employees taking swigs during lulls and all that? No amount of criminally conducted background checks could guarantee none of your employees were above sneaking a sip here and there if you weren't on top of it.

Whatever, Tim wasn't here to criticize the way Cobblepot runs his club. Maybe he threatened people's families or something to stop them siphoning booze.

On the off chance that someone poked their heads in, Tim pretended to browse the selection, as if he was searching for a specifically requested bottle. The best acts, after all, were the ones that didn't get dropped the moment no one could see you. They had a good selection here. Not *too* much variation, but enough options they could probably find something for anyone; a couple of nice merlots, a reisling, a few moscatos, several bordeauxs (a favourite of Cobblepot's, if Tim had to guess), some classy chardonnays, and a malbec Tim was a little tempted to steal if only he had a way to take it with him. There was nothing here that qualified as bottom shelf, and there was a couple of scotches Tim was pretty sure Bruce kept in his office at WE for investors.

While he waited, Tim counted to seventy-five, just long enough for

Cobblepot to finish whatever paper he had been working on and begin to hobble his way out into the hall. Tim very specifically stood to the side of the doorway so his shadow didn't fall across the opening, just in case.

He gave it another twenty seconds just to be certain, and then very cautiously cracked the door open. Coast was clear, he needed to get moving.

Tim slipped back into the hallway, and snuck back into Cobblepot's office.

Now if he were the entrance to a secret vault, where would he be hiding?

He started with the various paintings hung around the room, testing their frames and in some cases outright pulling them off the wall, before conceding that this must be before Cobblepot got *entirely* cliche about where he hid things. Or maybe he was just a different kind of predictable.

Next stop was the desk. At the very least, Tim could hopefully find something useful here, even if it didn't directly translate to the money he needed.

Letters, inventory list, more letters... Tim sifted through the papers as carefully as he could, doing his best to return everything to the position it had started in. There wasn't much here that was incriminating, mostly it was just coded reports that Tim didn't have the time to decipher. A couple of them he was *pretty* sure were drug related, so he took note of their addresses and moved on. Just as he was ready to call the desk a lost cause, he found at the very bottom of the piles a map of Gotham.

It was carefully tucked under a clear cover with a variety of coloured points across the city, with whole swathes lightly shaded in as well. Meeting points, stashes, drug routes, and safe houses all marked in a rainbow of *evidence.* Tim couldn't be sure what each colour meant just yet, but he could guess based on some of the locations and what *he* would use each one for.

Heh. He was getting pretty good at this *think like a crime boss* thing.

Normally at this point Tim would take a picture of the map to consult again later, but seeing as he didn't exactly have a camera on him he made sure to memorize at least two addresses of each colour. With any luck he could go investigate them later and maybe come away with some more supplies.

In the mean time, Tim decided to finally turn to the bookcase. Finger crossed Cobblepot was still as predictable as he would end up being in the future. Tim surveyed the shelves, eenie meenie minie... That one.

One particular book looked a little unnatural, the pages clearly stuck together and the spine a little too shiny to be any kind of normal binding. Unless it was a custom ordered hollow book, this had to be the mechanism for the hidden door. Not for the first time, Tim reflected on the bizarre applicability of Bruce's scattershot learning ethos that had reinforced Tim's own odd habits; know everything because anything could be useful.

And sure enough, after a careful tug, the book slid out halfway and

stuck with a click, the whole shelf clicking with it. Moving an entire bookshelf by himself wasn't *fun*, even with the wheels buried in the base, and Tim could only assume Cobblepot normally had some henchman handle this part.

With only some minor difficulty, Tim got the door to slide open, revealing exactly what he was hoping for. Stacks of money probably already laundered, a filing cabinet Tim was *sure* was full of blackmail and was thus faintly disappointed he didn't have the time to comb through , and various pieces of art that would be all but a neon sign over his head on the black market. So hard no. But the money and maybe some of the jewelry in the case shoved up against the wall were all very much a *yes*.

Now for the extraction, since Tim was still very much aware he was working on a time limit before Cobblepot returned to his office.

From a pocket carefully sewn into the lining of his vest, Tim procured two garbage bags, and then shook the first open. Not wasting a moment more, Tim scooped up various stacks of cash from around the vault, just in case they were organized by shared tracking numbers. Not worth the risk of getting caught the moment he tried to spend any of it.

The jewellery case was locked but with a wafer lock of all things. Either Cobblepot was confident no one would get in here without his say so, or he was just plain stupid. It took Tim a couple of seconds to jiggle it open, and then he had his pick of the lot. Since he hadn't made contact with any reliable fences just yet and it would be stupid to steal these from Cobblepot just to get it stolen from him before he could make any money off of them, Tim erred on the side of caution and only took a handful of pieces he was pretty sure were general enough he could sell them without immediately getting labelled as the guy who stole from the Penguin.

Rather than rob Cobblepot for everything he was worth, Tim only

filled up the one bag and then double bagged the whole lot. It would only be incredibly embarrassing if the bag ripped and spilled his ill-begotten goods everywhere.

Alright, on to the next step.

Careful not to let the garbage bag scrape along anything as he moved, Tim carefully closed the vault entrance and retreated to the hallway and made his way to the stairs. Wrestling the lock back open with one hand was kind of a fucking pain, but Tim was half convinced that the second he took his eyes off his loot bag it would disappear. So one-handed maneuvering it was and then it was back up two flights to the second door that was, in fact, still unlocked. Hopefully Cobblepot hadn't noticed.

Best to get out of here as fast as possible just to be safe.

Unfortunately for that particular plan, the exit to the dumpster was on the other side of the kitchen, and before he got even halfway there one of the line cooks called out to him. "Hey if you're taking out the trash, can you grab this one too?" she asked, swinging her foot back to tap the can behind her. "There's something in there that reeks and I'd like it gone please."

Tim would have loved to refuse, but before he could scramble together an excuse one of the expos chimed in. "There's one over here you can take too. Mostly just leftovers and napkins."

Great, Tim was now the resident garbage runner. Better than getting caught at least. But it was going to take *weeks* to get the smell of fish out of this shirt.

Now loaded down with three separate garbage bags, only one of

which he actually wanted, Tim finally made it to the exit, just in time for one of the people he had seen earlier on the floor to poke their head in and catch sight of him. Fuck.

"What the hell are you doing messing around with garbage, we just had a huge party show up and we need all hands on deck. Get that shit to the dumpster and get *back here*." What were the odds Tim could just walk out and not come back? Surely if they were *that* busy he would have at least a few minutes' head start.

Except, like a scrub, Tim had entirely forgotten about the smokers. Less than ten feet from the door, not even pretending to be up to code, was a handful of people presumably making the most of their break to get through as much of a pack of cigarettes as they could manage. He could either just keep walking and hope for the best, most assuredly blowing his fragile cover, or he could throw out the bags and head back inside and just come get *his* bag at the end of the night.

This was not going to be fun.

Tim tucked the bag with the money in the top right corner of the dumpster, painfully aware of the eyes on his back, and then tossed the other two in and made his way back into the kitchen, all the while trying to remember everything he had ever learned about the goings-ons of a bar. He was going to have to fake it well enough to pass muster at least until he could fake sick or sneak away or something. Undercover work was practically his middle name at this point, surely he could pull this off.

Of course, almost as soon as he stepped out of the kitchen, tray in hand, he made eye contact with that bartender again, and there was something about his gaze that raised the hair on the back of Tim's neck. His eyes skittered down to the pants that didn't quite fit, and

back to his awkwardly slicked hair that had mostly dried by now, and his hand drifted right to the underside of the counter.

Oh boy.

Was he calling cops, security, or both?

It didn't really matter, Tim needed to *move*.

Tim cut across the floor aiming right for him, and leaned causally on the counter, curling his tray towards himself and resting it on his hip between them and the rest of the room to hid the way his other hand latched itself around the bartender's wrist, holding it far enough away he wouldn't be able to reach any secret call buttons. His grip was probably a little tighter than was polite, but Tim was a bit too stressed to care.

"Come on now, I don't think that's going to be necessary, do you?" Tim tried to keep his voice on that fine line between whispering and speaking, quiet enough not to be overheard but loud enough not to be suspicious.

"On the contrary," the bartender challenged, wrist flexing. "A security breach of this level actually requires me to reach out to the security shift lead. Which you would know if you actually worked here."

Tim smiled at him, a little crooked, a little sheepish, with just enough of a harried edge to convey desperation. “Look I’m covering for a buddy of mine. He just started working here and hasn’t got enough time yet to take a day off with pay, but he has to take care of his little sister. We look similar enough we figured no one important would notice, okay?”

“Bullshit,” the bartender sneered. “You may be some bland white boy, but you don’t look like anyone we have on staff, and we haven’t hired anyone for the floor in the last month.”

Firstly, ow. Secondly, fuck. Changing tactics would only be a show of weakness at this point though, so Tim had to stick with it. “I don’t know how *your* leave time accumulates, but he was looking at least another month without missing a shift to get even a weekend off. I’m just doing a favour.”

Up until this point, Tim had done a pretty bang up job of keeping the bartender’s eyes on him and away from anyone else lest he try and signal them somehow, but abruptly his luck ran out on this little moment to themselves. Another server stepped up the bar, already rattling off a list of orders, rolling her eyes at their contact as if it were normal for coworkers to accost each other here. Tim was getting more and more concerned about the Iceberg Lounge’s HR set up by the minute.

Before Tim could say something to get her to walk away, the bartender spoke over him. “Charlotte, this guy doesn’t work here and just came out of the back. Call security for me, would you?”

Charlotte, apparently, raised a plucked eyebrow and sized Tim up

dismissively. “Are you sure you need to get them involved? I’m pretty sure between the two of us we could toss his scrawny ass out and we can just do an incident report since we’ll have to anyways.”

Okay fuck this, that counted as a threat. Tim was leaving and he could sneak out back later after this stupid place was closed for the night.

Tightening his grip further to the bartender’s obvious discomfort, thank you Dick’s insistence that when climbing skyscrapers grip strength was a matter of life and death, Tim pulled sharply, slamming him face first into the bar. Rather than wait for Charlotte to clock him in the side of the head, which with the size of her shoulders would *not* be pleasant, Tim swung up his tray to block and snapped a kick to her knee in the hopes of slowing her down for the next part.

To Tim’s complete lack of surprise, all eyes were on him and he could already see a handful of the ‘subtle’ security personnel around the room reaching into their coats. And here Tim was without appropriately bulletproof evening wear.

Tim jumped behind the bar and ducked just in time to avoid a number of uncomfortable new piercings, but now he was in awkwardly close proximity with the bitchy bartender. Best to just put him down for the count. Only a little sorry about it, Tim wrapped an arm around his throat, taking advantage of the fact he was still a little dazed, and dragged them both to the floor, counting down in his head until he could let go and get on with the rest of his escape.

From his new vantage point on the floor, Tim was once again reminded that this was a mob bar. Tucked under the counter, low down so as not to be pulled by accident, was a shotgun.

Was there a way to non-lethally use a shotgun?

Tim tested the thought for a second, trying to remember if Alfred had ever given him tips on this type of situation, but honestly he was fairly sure unless his opponents were at least twenty feet away they'd be looking at some serious damage. And from down here Tim couldn't tell how fast they were closing in. Best not to risk it then.

At least there were knives back here for slicing fruit. Between those and the glassware surely he could pull this off.

Dropping the bartender's very limp form to the floor, Tim snagged a handful of knives and an oldish looking lime. Now to *not* stick his head up like a suicidal meerkat. Tim took a second to listen to the gunfire, trying to gauge where the nearest shooters were. Once he was pretty sure he had where at least some of them were standing together, he lobbed the lime up and over hopefully into the middle of their group.

"Grenade!" one of them yelled, the gunfire cutting out as presumably people started trying to scatter without running into a pillar or each other.

That was his window. Tim vaulted over the bar, throwing knives at guns where he could to knock them out of peoples' hands, but mostly he just booked it for the nearest pillar to get the marble between him and some of the *alarmingly close* security guards before they realized he did not, in fact, throw a grenade.

Maybe it was a point to how much cardio Tim had been doing lately that he managed to make it halfway back to the kitchen and thus the lowest exits to guns ratio, before the crowd recovered from the definitely-a-grenade lime. Or maybe it was a reminder of how unprepared most people were for vigilante tactics nowadays. Either way, Tim was well aware that he didn't have long before all of the exits were covered, at which point he could kiss any hope of a clean getaway goodbye.

And just to complicate matters further, the kitchen staff was coming out from the back, and all of them were armed as well.

Time for creativity part two, return of the nonsense.

Tim slipped his tie off and tightened it a little, giving himself a nice loop to work with. He had maybe five seconds until the nearest set of footsteps rounded the corner. Rather than get shot immediately, Tim opted to drop into a crouch and at the first flash of overly shin leather he grabbed the guy by his belt and yanked him around the pillar and straight into Tim's fist. Next priority was pulling his gun from his hand, sliding the mag loose and clearing the chamber, and slipping the noose of his tie around the barrel and pulling it tight to maximize the length. Ranged-ish weapon acquired.

Driving an elbow into the poor goon's temple to drop him, Tim took a breath. More footsteps were incoming.

Rather than wait from the to reach him, Tim dove out of cover into a

roll and then back onto his feet whipping the gun at the first person he saw before pulling *hard* to snap it into their hands and then let it arch back into his own grasp. Only a moment later he pitched it again into a woman holding a clearly illegally modded pistol, this time letting it wrap around her wrist and forcing her off-balance and towards him. A foot hooked around her ankle and it was easy to pivot her past him towards the majority of the personnel. Just to be safe though he took her gun and tossed it into a corner, wincing when it fired a shot into a chandelier and sent a shower of crystal to the floor.

Whoops.

Trying not to think too hard about the property damage since he had seen some very clear evidence that Cobblepot could afford it, Tim spun his tie loose and turned into the next strike cracking it into a cheekbone and then down and into their hand, audibly breaking at least two fingers. No time to worry about inflicted injuries either, not if Tim wanted to survive this.

Since the kitchen was now officially guarded, Tim was going to have to go through the front door, which was of course across the room and passed most of the guns. Yay.

Tim ran, ducking in and out from behind pillars and trying not push anyone into the gunfire. Most of the guests had evacuated at this point, though there were a handful who had apparently decided to stay and watch the show. Maybe he could use that.

He turned sharply, going right for a woman in an elegant cream dress. Before she could run, Tim wrapped his tie once, twice, around her throat and pulled it tight, swinging her in between him and the

security team. Finally, they all seemed to hesitate, unsure if potentially harming her would start some kind of gang conflict. Tim didn't recognize her so he couldn't be sure, but in his defense, he was kind of under a lot of pressure at the moment.

A quick glance didn't reveal any specific security for her, which was either a good thing or a very bad thing, but Tim didn't have the time to find out. Dragging her with him, Tim made his way to the front door, doing his best to keep an eye on the room and his face angled into shadow as much as possible. His face was kind of a lost cause, but that was no excuse for making identifying him easier than it had to be. The woman came surprisingly quietly, and Tim tried not to look that gift horse in the mouth, even as he ran possibilities on what she might know that he didn't that might be causing her complicity.

When they were only a couple of feet from the exit, Tim shoved her away from himself, dropping the tie-gun-thing entirely and sprinting outside. The shouting behind him was *excellent* motivation to get gone, which thankfully he had all kinds of experience in. He was up the side of the building across the street in moments, and then it was just a matter of hiding in the shadow of the air conditioner and getting comfy. Or as comfy as he could in someone else's pants on gravel and in the wind, while very sore since he hadn't exactly had time to warm up before that fight.

Odds were the Iceberg Lounge was going to shut down for the night, so all Tim had to do was wait for the lights to go out and then he could pick up his garbage bag of loot from the dumpster and *finally* go home and get on to the next stage in trying to acquire supplies and materials for his lab.

With any luck, the next steps wouldn't be half as much of a pain in the ass as this was.

Chapter End Notes

Howdy folks!!

It's been a while, and I blame that mostly on being busy and tired and also kind of depressed. But at the very least this week has been a good one so I've done my best to get as much done as possible! And this was one of those things!! I also wasn't actually sure how I was going to end this until last night at 3am so thanks for that brain. I had some issues with formatting since I switched writing programs, so this might be facing some edits for the next day or two.

Tim is getting places, but man sometimes those places are pretty Yikes. Surely this series of events will have no consequences. Surely.

In regards to my other stuff, this weeks podcast episode was on Madoka Magica and I did most of the talking so that's neat https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6r5EPMHlFQ This wednesday we'll be putting up the finale to our Ani-May series, lead by our resident weeb.

Edit: on Rereading this I realize several places where I did Dumb Things, so rest assured those have been fixed and many thanks to everyone who did me the kindness of ignoring them. One day I'll edit before posting. One day.

Thanks for all of your patience and ongoing support, I appreciate you very much!!! I hope you personally and specifically have a good day!! <3

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sitting on a roof for an hour, watching armed goons disperse and return, with no clear search pattern to any of their movements whatsoever (amateurs), was not exactly Tim's definition of fun.

Still, there was something kind of fun about watching them scramble, desperate to pretend everything was normal to avoid drawing in any cops while also doing their damnedest to tear apart the surrounding streets in search of him. Tim was a little worried about potential collateral to the locals, but its not like the housing near the Iceberg Lounge was anything resembling cheap. They could probably afford it, though he'd keep an eye out just in case.

Unfortunately, Tim wasn't able to keep a clear line of sight on the dumpster without literally sticking his neck out of hiding, so for the most part he stayed crouched in the shadows and watched possibly the entirety of Cobblepot's lose their collective head. How long would it be until they thought to look up? Catwoman was active these days, at least a little, and she was known to use the rooftops. Surely it wasn't that much of a stretch to consider that another criminal might too.

Why were they so convinced that Tim had to be somewhere below? Were they just stupid, or was there something Tim wasn't-

Before Tim could finish the thought, before he could even think to move, he caught the undeniable sound of a kevlar polymer cape rippling through the air.

Ah. Right.

Them .

Tim barely dared to breath, pressing himself backwards deeper into darkness, painfully aware of the hard soles on his stupid dress shoes and the stark white of his dress shirt.

Did they know he was here, or was this just their chosen vantage point as well?

Surely even his luck couldn't be *this* bad, right?

"What do you think happened here, B? Whatever it is, it's not on any of the police scanners. Some kind of infighting, maybe?" Robin asked, peering over the edge of the roof, hands on his belt.

Tim tried not to think about how this was the longest and safest he had seen his brother in the last six months. This wasn't his brother, after all. Not yet.

If he fucked this up badly enough, maybe not ever.

Batman loomed behind Robin, cutting a dark swath across the flicker of a yellow cape. “Not infighting, everyone down there is moving with a common purpose. There was an external threat. And it got away.”

Well, not exactly, but close enough.

“The question, Robin, is what was the purpose of the attack, and did it accomplish its goal?”

Yes, but also no. He was working on it.

Robin hummed, rocking back and forth gently on his feet. “The Iceberg Lounge wouldn’t be my first target for a robbery, so it can’t have been anything run of the mill. It must have been a deliberate move against Penguin of some kind.”

There was something deeply uncomfortable about listening to people theorizing about a crime Tim was technically still in the process of committing. Being directly behind them and hoping not to get caught certainly wasn’t helping the matter. His leg was starting to cramp from how tense he was, but Tim was pretty sure if he so much as swayed they would spot him and then the jig would be up.

“There have been some strange changes in the gangs around Crime Alley. This might be our chance to find out why. Robin, pick a squad

and follow them, see if you can find out who or what they're looking for. It seems they're almost done closing down for the night, so I'll go get a closer look at the crime scene." Batman's orders were soft and precise, and Tim's chest ached. He didn't think he had ever heard B sound quite like *that* while in uniform.

But on the upside, this would hopefully give Tim the opening he needed to collect his ill-gotten goods and be on his way. Another barely-there whisper of capes and the whir of a grappling line, and Tim was once again alone on his little rooftop.

Taking his time on the off chance either of the Bats decided to look behind them, Tim crept to the edge of the roof to get eyes on his dumpster and-

Was that a garbage truck?

In the middle of the night?

For a moment, Tim was so flabbergasted he forgot to even *think* about what he was going to do about this apparent Midnight Trash Collector, who was, as he watched, emptying the entire dumpster into their truck. Distantly, Tim hoped his double-bagging held up against the onboard compactor.

What the fuck.

Across the street, before his very eyes, the truck started and exited the parking lot.

This was about to be the exact opposite of interesting. This was, without a doubt, about to be viscerally painful.

Before he could spiral too far into despair, and the honest question of which superpowerful entity he had pissed off this time, Tim started running.Of course, because there was basically no traffic in the middle of the night, the garbage truck had no issue clearing three intersections, going at at least forty miles per hour. Tim, on his own two feet with nothing but his emergency short-range grapple, was at a ludicrous disadvantage. His shoes had nowhere near the grip required for safe rooftop parkour, no gloves meant he was probably going to tear the shit out of his hands, and if he had to run more than a couple of hundred feet in these pants odds were decent the modifications he had made earlier in the bathroom so they would fit were going to fall apart.

Of course, he wouldn't be a Bat if he let that matter.

There was no way Tim was going to be able to *catch* it if he just followed it, not like this anyways, so he was going to have to head it off. But what kind of garbage route included the Iceberg Lounge and then nowhere nearby? Did Cobblepot have his own specialty service, or was this an imposter driving a stolen truck? While that possibility spiked the most anxiety, there was no way for anyone to have known what he was going to do, mostly because *Tim* hadn't known how this night was going to go and it had been his plan.

Unfortunately, if he didn't know who exactly he was dealing with, it was going to be incredibly hard to predict where the hell they were going. Why had he never encountered the Midnight Garbage Collector before?

Maybe he was just going to have to follow it as closely as possible until its next stop.

As predicted, the pants were already dangling and threatening to trip him with every step, and his shoes were somehow pinching his feet and loose enough to start rubbing blisters into his heels with every step.

Tim supposed that was what he got for wearing thin, cheap socks.

Whether he liked it or not, Tim had to be sparing with his grapple. He was no where near the top of his game on stealth, and he couldn't afford to get spotted with technology Alvin Draper had no business with access to. Sure it was dark, but the streets were still crawling with Penguin's henchmen, and Tim wasn't willing to bank on them not hearing his movements, what with the heavy click of his hard-soled shoes on stone that followed every jump.

He should probably try and ditch as much of this outfit as possible as soon as he got the chance. Definitely before he headed home for the night. Just to be safe.

Tim was able to make up a block when the truck stopped at a

seemingly random restaurant, but it seemed to barely stop long enough to pick up the trash and go. Maybe he'd look into the place later. If it turned out to be a mob front or something that would tell him something about this guy's deal. Assuming it wasn't a weird ghost or something, that was always possible.

Tim hoped it wasn't a ghost. Ghosts were so hard to punch.

Just as Tim was swinging his way around on a fire escape, trying to cut a few seconds closer so as no to lose sight of the truck as it rounded a corner, he heard it again.

A grapple gun and the whisper of footsteps on steel that wanted to rattle.

Which meant that at the very least Robin was nearby, and by the placement of it Tim was going to guess he'd been seen and Robin was closing in.

This was not ideal.

How much of Tim's face had Robin seen in the basement of that coffee shop? Would he be able to recognize him?

It seemed like Tim was about to find out, because using his superior momentum and an extra entirely-for-show flip that Dick always swore

improved his landings even though it definitely didn't, Robin overtook him and perched only a little dramatically on the fire escape ahead of him.

"Not exactly a great nice for a stroll, though I guess taking the high road is *one* way to avoid muggers." His grin was knife sharp, but he didn't seem to be too concerned, which hopefully meant that Robin didn't know that Tim was the guy who broke his nose a while ago.

There wasn't anywhere for Tim to casually lean that wouldn't result in a civilian falling off the building, so Tim tried to project the air of casual leaning instead. "Well, you know. Gotta get my cardio in somehow. Though all the jumping is hell on my pedometer."

He was so going to get punched off a rooftop.

Robin cocked his head, still smiling, and not even subtly gave Tim a once-over. Either he was confident he could get what he wanted out of Tim, or he had already called Batman and he was on his way. Maybe both.

"We could keep discussing the merits of parkour as exercise, or you could cut to the chase and tell me what exactly you're running from," Robin suggested, one hand hooked in his belt dangerously close to his birdarangs, and the other keeping him anchored to the pipe over his head. "If you're in danger, I can help."

The faux concern could have been cute if he wasn't simultaneously

threatening Tim. It kind of was anyways, Dick had always been special like that.

Before Tim could deflect again, already resigning himself to taking to the alleys for the next few blocks of his chase while he lost the bird who would no doubt be following him, there was a very suspicious silence behind him.

That would be Batman arriving, then.

Time for some creative application of the truth.

Tim let himself bounce a little anxiously, craning to peer past Robin to where the garbage truck was still stopped at a light. The red hand was flashing though, meaning Tim really didn't have much time before it was on the move again. "Look, I'm actually kind of chasing a garbage truck right now, and I'd really appreciate if you let me get going before I lose it completely."

Robin went still in that way that meant he was blinking behind his mask. A civilian wouldn't notice, however, so Tim couldn't tease him for it like he wanted to.

The shadow behind him decided now was a good time to make its presence known. If Tim hadn't already been aware he probably would have jumped out of his skin. "Why are you chasing a garbage truck in the middle of the night?"

Doing his best to fake a reasonable amount of shock, Tim spun around to look up, up, *up* towards Batman's inscrutable mask. That fabled growth spurt Alfred had swore was coming would have been nice right about now.

Robin, now behind him in such a way that should have made his skin itch but instead only felt like home, chimed in. "Why is there even a garbage truck running this late? Aren't most routes morning based?"

"They're auxiliary collectors. Certain locations get skipped during normal shifts if they're running late, so one of the nightly collectors gets to them later." *Ohhhh* that made sense. Every time Tim was settled into the idea that Batman didn't know everything he pulled out something like this and brought that into question all over again.

Still, Tim now knew why he didn't recognize them. A couple of years from now, after a particularly nasty situation involving bombs planted in dumpsters, there had been reform for the whole trash collection system involving fireproof containers and strictly regulated pickups. One of the results had been an increase in pay for garbage collectors, so at least something good had come of that mess.

Tim's night time adventure jacket had reeked of dead fish for *weeks,* and he had nearly cracked a lens on his camera.

"That's all well and good, B, but what's this punk here doing chasing one?" Robin asked, shifting in such a way that the metal creaked ominously. It had to be deliberate, since Dick was perfectly capable of

moving silently even now.

More on topic, however, Tim needed a lie that would be sufficiently emotional that they'd let him go do things that were objectively dumb for a civilian to be doing, while also not emotional enough that they would feel the need to help him.

"I was working, a shift in the kitchens, but when I took out the trash I lost my ring in one of the bags. I would have looked for it then and there, but I was still on the clock and if I got caught wasting time I would be done for. So I left it for the end of my shift, but before I could get out back, the truck took the bags, so now I'm trying to follow it until it dumps for the night and I can look. Can I *please* just get back to it before I lose it?"

There, no excess details like *where* exactly he was supposedly working, but rambling enough that they knew he was a little panicked, a little desperate.

Batman's head tilted slightly, taking in Tim's appearance. Hm. Not ideal, because there was no way B wasn't going to recognize him after two meetings. He was thinking something through, though Tim couldn't really begin to guess what. Too many variables. If he had to guess it was probably a threat assessment. That was usually a safe bet.

Behind them, Robin made a noise that wasn't actually a scoff, but it was close enough that Tim could *hear* the ghost of Alfred's lecture about manners. "What's so important about this particular ring? Can't you get another one?"

Well that was an unexpected lack of understanding. Tim was honestly thrown off a little. It was weird to remember Dick hadn't always been exactly the way he knew him.

Uncomfortable thought, time to refocus.

"It was my dad's," Tim said shortly, hoping to discourage any further questions.

For some reason, Batman twitched at that, looking back at Tim with a frankly weird amount of intent. His hands weren't twitching, B always had too much control for that, but there was the slightest tension beneath his cape that meant they wanted to.

Rather than look too deeply into whatever was fueling *that* instinct, Tim tried to look as serious as he could with too big pants, an untucked shirt, and windswept hair. "If that's all, I need to get going."

"Come on, B! He's clearly hiding something! I bet he came right from the Iceberg Lounge."

Just because it was true didn't mean it wasn't rude to call him out like that. No need to be a dick about it.

And there was a classic ‘Cut That Out Robin’ look, the one that could stop a wayward partner in their tracks, normally only employed in the presence of civilians when Batman wanted to take the lead on an interaction. Tim wasn’t sure if he should be flattered or not.

“Plenty of people in Crime Alley are technically criminals without hurting people, Robin. Mr. Draper here doesn’t seem the type to hurt people for his own gain,” Batman said, and ah. That was what the look had been about then. Without actually moving, Batman gave the impression of turning to Tim. “The night collectors stop at the depot on Moldoff and Reed for the night and take their loads to the landfill in the morning.”

Score one for Tim’s sympathetic storytelling.

Tim nodded. “Thanks. Now if you’ll excuse me.” He tried to sidle awkwardly past the still fuming Robin, but froze when a gloved hand dropped heavily onto his shoulder.

“Get off the rooftops. You can follow on the street.” Batman’s tone brooked no argument.

Damn. That was going to be inconvenient. If someone tried to mug him at this point Tim refused to be held accountable for his actions.

Begrudgingly, Tim made his way down the fire escape, painfully aware of the eyes on his back the whole time. No jumps from questionable heights for him.

At least he had a location now.

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By the time Tim made it to the truck depot, the blisters on his heels had formed and popped so he was probably going to have to toss these shoes as the cleaning supplies to get the blood out would cost as much the shoes had.

Breaking in was in no shape or form even a little bit difficult. The door wasn't even locked, though at least the key box for all of the trucks was. Tim would bet the key to it was in the office, not that it mattered. The locks on the trucks were cheap enough Tim could just pop them open and start looking. Life would have been so much easier if he'd been able to spot the truck number, but nope. Instead he was just going to have to sift through, truck by truck.

Digging around, even just between the bags made Tim deeply regret not bringing gloves. Some of them had split, because of course they had, and the whole place was rank.

Tim tried not to think too hard about the fluid he was standing in. That way laid only madness. And disinfectant showers.

After far, *far* too long, Tim found his bag. The outer plastic had a tear

along it from a broken bottle (come on people, that was obviously recyclable what's it doing here?), but the inner bag seemed okay.

Finally, loot in hand, Tim made his way back towards the entrance, feeling a little like garbage himself.

The walk home was appropriately miserable, with the sun starting to stain the smog layer a deep burnt orange. After this, Tim was going to take as long a shower as he wanted, shared water tank be damned. It would be early enough in the day that he probably wouldn't be competing with anyone.

Or maybe, as always, he spoke too soon.

His door was unlocked.

There, in little piles on his ugly sofa and understuffed chair, were his- the kids. Luke, Jason, Marianne, and Layla. Marianne and Layla were wrapped up in each other, a blanket draped over both of them, though their necks would probably be stiff in the morning. Luke was tucked in between Jason and the back of the chair, arms curled close like he was trying to make himself smaller even in sleep. Jason had a lazy arm thrown over Luke, squishing up close enough he wasn't in immediate danger of falling onto the floor, though his position was without a doubt the most precarious.

They must have been waiting for him to get home and fallen asleep.

Tim swallowed around the sudden weight in his throat.

They'd been waiting for him.

Putting his training to perhaps the best use he'd ever found for it, Tim crept to his room and back, dropping off the garbage bag and gathering his bedding. Carefully, he lined the base of the chair with his couple of pillows in case Jason did tip off at some point in the night, and gently placing his blanket over the pair of them. His insulation sucked, he didn't want them getting cold.

Then it was off to strip out of his soiled shirt and pants, and taking that shower. Tim had never cared less about water pressure as he finally felt clean for the first time since stepping into the Iceberg Lounge.

After towelling off and putting on a pair of loose sleep pants, Tim snuck back to his kitchen to grab a protein bar and mug of water. He could have a proper meal in the morning. Maybe make some pancakes for the chipmunks. Tim was pretty sure he had syrup somewhere.

Now that he had the money, he would need to make some calls to chemical distributors to set up long term deliveries. Ace Chemicals might have what he needed, and they were local, but their business practices were dubious at best. And now he could afford to shop around a little, see if he could find something better, more environmentally friendly and sustainable if possible.

He could also finish off those safehouses, get them up and running for the kids, with an above board connection to the city grid he could now afford to pay.

Something in his chest pulled tight at the realization that it really was just power and a few more basic renovations that the first few houses needed. After that, the kids would be okay. Probably wouldn't even need to come bum dinner off of him anymore, not when he was stocking the safehouses regularly.

Being upset was ridiculous, this had been the plan all along. He was never going to get to keep any of this. All he could do was his best to make their lives a little safer before he was inevitably pulled out and away.

Tim wondered what Luke was getting up to, twelve years from now.

But all that was Tomorrow Tim's problem. All Tim needed to do now was crash and rest up for whatever was coming next.

Stretching out on his mattress, trying to work free the worst of the tension before passing out, Tim couldn't find it in himself to mind the lack of proper bedding. It was being put to better use anyways.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!! A little under a month this time, hell yeah!

Tim now officially has what we in the biz call Resources, which

should be fun to play with for the next little bit. Of course he's mostly got plans for how he's gonna use them, but still. Things happen. Speaking of! Bruce! I enjoyed writing Bruce while also being paralyzed with indecision about how I wrote Dick. He's certainly picking up on Tim's Weird Vibes, making him less friendly than normal, and i'm gently concerned it comes across as OOC. I guess that'll be up to you :p

I've been less existentially depressed which is cool but noticeably more tired, so my productivity is still around the same. Yay -_-

In podcast news, this week will see the last of our Pride Month content is going up this week, with last week's being on coming our stories in media https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iE2CFivwdU Important note, while two of us Are queer, the other two hosts are Very Straight, and so they're Doing Their Best. Also, feel free to message me on discord for the Secret Ten Minutes that I had to cut over a creative disagreement. I spend most of it being Salty about Alan Scott.

Thanks so much for all of your patience, and thanks to everyone who has very kindly bullied me into working on this some more. As always, feel free to call out any typos since this got very cursory editing. I hope you all have a wonderful week <3

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Now that Tim finally had some nice and shiny liquid assets to work with, he had no interest in wasting any more time. It was go time.

First things first, he needed chemicals and he needed them yesterday.

While he'd probably have to put in his own orders going forward, possibly including some at Ace Chemicals if he could find a way to be sure they weren't going to be horribly tainted by supervillains every other week, it could take weeks for those orders to be filled, so for this first batch, he was going to have to cheat a little.

Or maybe a lot.

Thanks to his handy dandy backdoor into the system at the docks, Tim could see that there was a shipment coming in that very day that would have at least enough of what he needed to get started. Some of the more complicated medications might have to wait, but if he could get the basics going and get them out on the streets that would save lives and allow a reputation to build that would make people more likely to *take* the really critical ones in the first place.

And since it was for a good cause and Tim could see that it was just going to a- energy drink plant? Oh that probably wasn't good. Tim made a mental note to avoid anything from the Daily Rush brand, and warn others off of the stuff too. He'd investigate the contact, some guy by the name of Hellfern, if he got the free time, see why exactly they were using chemicals Tim had flagged for medical use in their products intended for casual consumption.

Maybe Tim would get lucky and they were just stupid. He wouldn't hold his breath.

Tim would also have to consider that the current production warehouse probably didn't have a big enough capacity for the entirety of Crime Alley, and he'd probably need to source additional locations at some point. He might be able to use that weird empty warehouse where he had found that cart for his furniture if it was still out of use.

But he also had more pressing property concerns. Now that he had funds, he needed to buy and install the backup generators for the kids' safehouses, as well as ensure the properties were in his fake name so that there would be no chance of eviction. It would be a waste of everyone's time to get these places set up just for them to get shut down the second anyone with a financial interest in the area caught wind.

Which meant Tim was going to have to talk to a realtor.

Thankfully, realtors generally made themselves easily accessible for obvious reasons, so it didn't take Tim long to track down an office only a couple of blocks away from at least one of the locations. Now all he had to do was convince them to let him buy the properties without anyone actually *looking* at them. Should be fun.

Entering the realtor's office was vaguely like entering a sepia-toned paperclip commercial. Everything was varying shades of brown, the only exceptions being various photos on the wall in shades of gray with the occasionally featured tree. Tim would give credit where it

was due, at least the composition on the photos was good, even if the subjects were lacking. Not like it was the photographer's fault the best architecture in Gotham would never work with a place like this. And was all mostly owned by family's who had hoarded the glass and gargoyles for generations.

The receptionist was a tired young man, wearing one of those short-sleeved button ups that always reminded Tim of the Geek Squad, even if it was probably because this building didn't seem to have air conditioning.

Still, he greeted Tim with a genuine enough smile as he approached. "Welcome to Better Homes Realtors. What can I do for you today?"

Tim returned the man's warmth, guessing from the lack of anyone else in the waiting room that this was probably some of the first social interaction he had gotten since his shift started. "I'm looking to buy some property in the area."

"We can certainly help you with that," the receptionist replied, clearly trying to stifle his surprise as he eyed Tim appraisingly. "Are you buying on someone's behalf?"

"I get that kind of thing a lot," Tim laughed, brushing off his soft annoyance with a shrug. "I know I look a little young, but property is one of the safest investments you can make, and I'm looking to build a future here."

The receptionist still seemed dubious, but he at least kept the rest of his concerns to himself. "Well I can get you set up with one of our realtors if that's what you want. Kelly just got off lunch and should be free to help you out. She's in office three."

Tim thanked him and took his directions past the desk and towards the small hallway in the back. The dark carpet ate any sound his footsteps could have made anyways, but Tim resisted the urge to walk more comfortably. Alvin Draper had no business walking like someone trained in stealth operations, after all.

He'd have to do a patrol or something tonight to work off this extra energy before it had him making a sloppy mistake.

Arriving at what he assumed was the right door, Tim knocked twice, clear and crisp. There were times to be underestimated, but if Tim was going to buy multiple properties in one go despite only theoretically having a bank account, he needed 'Kelly' to take him seriously.

After a moment, a woman's voice called him inside, and Tim entered the office. Surprisingly, it seemed Kelly had made some attempts to liven up her workspace, with a vase of flowers on her desk, pictures of what he would guess were her children, and a motivational cat poster on the wall.

Like the receptionist, Kelly's smile was real enough, if a little tired, as she stood to shake his hand. "My name is Kelly Davis and I'm one of the senior realtors here at Better Homes. Daniel said you were looking to buy?"

Huh. Apparently they had some kind of in-office communication system. Tim wondered if it had just been the phone or on the computer, not that it really mattered. He hadn't heard the receptionist, Daniel apparently, speak, so his bet was on the latter, which was interesting. Maybe this organization was better off than he would have assumed.

Back to the matter at hand though, Tim made sure to meet Kelly's level of professional enthusiasm. "Yes. I recently came into possession of a fair amount of liquid assets that I want to invest into property. I already have a list of addresses I was thinking of, though I understand if some of them may fall outside of your area of operation."

Kelly looked a little gobsmacked, though she rallied impressively. "If I could take a look at your list that would be wonderful. May I ask what your budget is?"

He would actually really prefer if she didn't. Mostly because Tim hadn't *actually* done any work to fence the jewelry so he wasn't entirely sure how much money he was working with. At least he had a decent grasp on his cash situation.

Tim placed the scrap of paper where he had scribbled down the various addresses he had accumulated and his proposed bid for each on to the desk and slid it towards her. "I did some research on my own and this is what I believe each of these properties are worth. I am interested in all of them, if at all possible."

"I... Can probably arrange that. A few of these I'm going to have make

a few calls about, since I believe at least one of them has been condemned, but if you're willing to sign paperwork that assures you intend to repair them within a specific time frame there should be no problem," Kelly drummed her fingers against the desk once, the neon blue of her nails a bright point between the dark wood and her dark fingertips. "I see many of these have potential as housing complexes, are you looking to renovate and rent them out?"

"Would it matter if I was?" Tim asked, raising an eyebrow.

Kelly hummed, and began typing away at her computer. "Depends on a few other things, actually, but I might be able to get you some interesting deals since you're buying several locations at once with interest in restoration. The city has been debating getting some of them torn down for ages, but it always ends up on the backburner when some new scandal comes out. At least one of these is pretty old, you might be able to get a grant to help pay for some of the repairs."

Oh that would make life so much easier. Though they might want personal information about Alvin Draper that didn't exist, since Tim was pretty sure most grants required several layers of approvals and background checks. Still, it would be nice to have the option.

"How long do you have, Mister Draper? Because we can get the ball really rolling on a least half of these if you don't mind staying for a few hours," Kelly asked, already engrossed in whatever it was she was looking at.

"I have time," Tim replied, leaning forward. He understood paperwork and applying for things took time, but if he could get this squared away enough to be in the works that would let him focus on the

minutiae of getting his medication functional. "What do you have in mind?"

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Several hours, a minor headache, and an outfit change later, Tim was perched overlooking the docks.

The chemicals he needed should be pulling in in the next twenty minutes, and Tim was going to be right there to meet with the crew to ensure that the delivery ended up at his warehouse instead of at Daily Rush's.

Now he did have the minor problem of most of the dock workers having at the very least seen him before, given his periodic comings and goings to work on the yardmaster's computer. And it wasn't like he could buy a bunch of chemicals in full costume. So, Tim was compromising. Big, baggy sweater to hide the body armour he wore underneath, the hood up and a domino besides, and his Red Robin leggings and boots. Not his most professional look, but it ought to be distinct enough from how he normally dressed to do the trick. Probably.

Then it was just a matter of convincing those interacting with the freight that, actually, this whole shipment had never shown up and it was a darn shame, really, but Rush should probably take that up with whoever it was the shipped the stuff since there wasn't anything dockworkers could do about the situation.

And for the ship's crew, well. Tim could sign off on the freight's arrival easily enough while managing the yard's records to directly refute that and if it turned out that whoever had signed for the freight didn't actually exist? That was a darn shame.

A darn shame indeed.

Between his assurances that no one's service records would be negatively impacted and some considerate applications of bribes, Tim had a box truck full of potentially hazardous chemicals all to himself in no time.

Thankfully his warehouse wasn't too far from the docks themselves, as it had been a while since the last time he had driven anything of this size and he was already missing being able to see behind himself.

Which led to his next problem; unloading the truck.

Sure he *could* do the heavy-lifting and get everything onto the workfloor himself, but the simple truth of the matter was he didn't *want* to.

So, alternatives.

Tim could call up the various techs who he had steadily been building information dockets on and hope they decided to show up and help rather than avoid him forever on the grounds he was an incredibly

invasive creep.

He could also wander around a bit and see if there was anyone lingering around willing to make a little money moving stuff for an evening.

Or, he could do something kind of risky but with potentially huge payoff.

See, Tim had been thinking about Waylon Jones since their very weird encounter, and he had a few ideas.

Very few people's *first* choice was to be a cannibalistic monster in the sewers. And its not like Jones had chosen his skin condition or even his weird fucked up teeth. Odds were, Jones had, at least for a while, tried to live a normal life and failed.

So what if Tim gave him the chance for reliable employment?

Sure there would still be potential legal issues around some of his earlier illegal activities, but Crime Alley was full of people who could get arrested at any time. If Tim could get Jones a steady income and at least a handful of stores where he could shop without being discriminated against, maybe he could prevent a frankly terrifying number of people from being eaten.

The real question was what could Tim ask Jones to do that wasn't just being a big scary monster. But he'd had a few ideas about that too.

Someone was going to need to manage the warehouse floor to make sure production was on schedule and that all of the medications were an acceptable quality. And given Jones' enhanced sense of smell, Tim would bet that he could, given time, distinguish between good samples of medication and subpar samples.

Management and quality control. And yes, by virtue of Jones' existence there would also be some nifty intimidation for competitors and anyone considering double crossing Tim.

Now all he had to do was sell Jones on the idea.

Well, technically, first he had to *find* Jones, and ask for a hand moving cargo so he could make the pitch. Semantics.

Was it a great idea to climb down into the sewers and yell his name as loud as he could? Probably not, but Tim was fairly confident it would *work* so who cared. Moving the manhole cover was a pain in the ass though, those things were always way heavier than Tim expected.

Sure enough, it was only a few minutes later that Jones emerged with barely a ripple from the water. Spooky, Tim approved.

"You don't look injured," he frowned. "What do you want?"

Tim gave his most winning smile, the one that said *have I got an idea for you*, trying not to think too hard about why Jones assumed he would be injured. "I was hoping you might be willing to lend me a hand moving some things. Some of them are a little touchy and I didn't want to risk dropping anything."

Jones didn't really have eyebrows, but if he did Tim was sure they would be raised. "You want me to. Move boxes for you?"

"Well some of it's in pails, but yes please. I was going to order some Chinese takeout while we worked, if you want to share?" Tim offered. Outright paying him at this stage would be a mistake. Tim wasn't looking to antagonize him or suggest that he viewed Jones strictly as a commodity.

There was a long moment were Tim thought he would say no and possibly attack him for being so presumptuous as to call for him deliberately, and just as he was about to take it back to try and salvage the situation, Jones shrugged. "I could eat. I want an order of ginger beef to myself."

"I can definitely do that," Tim grinned, fighting down a giddy laugh. Jones had been laughed at enough in his life, Tim didn't need to contribute to that, even if he was mostly just relieved. "The site isn't far from here, if you don't mind using a ladder."

Tim would savour the sight of Killer Croc awkwardly cramming himself up and out of a sewer for the rest of his life. Not that his life would be that long if he ever mentioned that to Jones.

The look on Jones' face when they actually *got* to the warehouse and he got a look at what Tim was asking him to move was a little less entertaining. It looked like Jones wanted to say something but wasn't quite sure what. Tim decided it would be for the best if Jones wasn't given the time to figure it out.

He hopped up into the back and scooped up the first of many, many boxes. While not the heaviest thing he had ever had to lift, Tim would very much prefer to not have to carry it for any longer than was strictly necessary. He also wasn't looking forward to the impact jumping down was going to have on his knees, since he couldn't exactly tuck and roll the extra weight. Whatever, he'd deal like he always did.

Except as he made his way back to the edge of the truck, Jones held out a large hand for the box. Well that was nice of him.

And it boded well for what Tim was going to ask of him.

But he needed to take this slow, or he could still get chucked into the harbour or something significantly more violent.

For the first twenty minutes, Tim chatted about Chinese food, his personal preferences, favourite restaurants, the weird origin of green

onion cakes, on and on filling the dead air between them and letting Jones chime in occasionally with opinions on noodle sizes and seasoning. When they had some kind of consensus on dishes, Tim placed the order, giving the address for a warehouse over at the insistence of his paranoia, and he hoped Jones didn't notice, since he hadn't really stopped with the weird looks despite Tim's best efforts and Tim didn't really want to give him any more reasons to look at him funny.

Moving the pails was a pain in the ass, but after Jones' very cautiously put one foot on the truck and the whole thing had groaned threateningly, they had agreed it was probably best if Tim was the one to move them from the back into reach.

Finally, all of the chemicals were stacked neatly enough just inside the warehouse and food was still about twenty minutes out, by Tim's reckoning. Which meant, it was time to start distributing the supplies from work station to work station and make sure everyone had a copy of the recipes he had definitely not stolen from any company's databases or anything, no sir. If they happened to be similar, Tim would chalk it up to the nature of chemistry and convergent research.

He didn't really need Jones for this part, but if he could familiarize him with the components and future processes, it would make Jones' life easier later on. Assuming he took the job, anyways.

So Tim kept up his quiet commentary as he began to unpack things, shifting topics to what each component was and why it was needed in the ratios it was. He also snagged a face mask and gloves from a nearby worktable first and offered a mask to Jones, though he doubted he could even get any of the gloves here on. No need to disregard safe handling of chemicals just because this whole process wasn't exactly above board.

Jones watched him move around the warehouse, clearly trying to form some kind of opinion, or maybe using that opinion as a lens to judge him. Still, it only took a couple of station setups before he started to assist with that too, cradling boxes of vials and plastic jugs carefully and setting them gently in place.

Tim couldn't help but notice he was putting things as close to where Tim had placed them on the desks he was working with as Jones probably could, given the awkward size of his hands and the amount of obviously delicate equipment at each station.

They were about halfway through when Jones finally asked the question that had been obviously eating at him. "What are you actually making here?"

He couldn't have asked a more perfect question if Tim had scripted this encounter and given Jones a copy. Tim could work with this.

"Medication. I'm working on a deal with a local pharmacy where they'll sell my product below market value so long as its clean, and I'll get to make money and know that at least a few less people are going to die or starve because they couldn't afford the healthcare they need to live." Tim was careful to make eye contact as he spoke, knowing full well that plenty of people avoided Jones' eyes, either because they were uncomfortable to look at or because they had some stupid notions based on animal behaviour, as if Jones wasn't a man under the scales and periodic cannibalistic episodes.

Jones squinted slightly, eyes flickering around the warehouse before settling back on Tim. "No one is going to buy anything important from some brat in a warehouse in *Gotham*."

A grin, all teeth and maybe a little too smug for his own good. "And that's what the pharmacy is for. If they vouch for my product, and people are desperate enough, they'll buy it. After that, all it has to do is *work* and they'll keep buying from me instead of whatever pharmaceutical company is currently trying to find out exactly what people will pay to survive."

“Why did you ask for my help?” Jones asked, finally cutting to the chase.

Tim couldn’t actually tell if he was on board with anything yet, but in his defense, he was unused to judging Jones’ moods that weren’t Murderously Hangry, and Confused. In the grand tradition of fake it ‘till you make it, Tim would proceed like Jones was interested until otherwise proven.

“I needed help moving some things that I’d risk messing up my back to do myself, and I figured if that panned out you might be interested in helping out with a couple of other things, so long as I make it worth your while.”

“And will it be?” Jones asked with a flash of teeth. “Worth my while, that is?”

His teeth may not have been filed to points by a carnie with zero interest in the well-being of children, but Tim was pretty good at his own brand of sharpness, and he matched Jones' not-quite snarl point for point. "It certainly can be, assuming you're wiling to pull your weight."

For a split second, Tim thought he'd miscalculated. A little too mean, a little too harsh, just enough to lose whatever good faith he had managed to scrounge up with Jones thus far.

And then Jones laughed, a grinding sound that edged on mean, even as Tim was fairly sure it wasn't intended to be. It must have been a while since Jones had anything besides another's misfortune to laugh at. "Fine, I'm listening. What exactly do you want my help with, little not-a-Bat?"

"I can admit to biting off more than I can chew on this one. I need someone to manage the floor, make sure the techs are doing their jobs, and then to do some bookkeeping. Finances, paychecks, maybe inventory. I can set up a program to use, but I can't *be* here to use it. If your sense of smell is up to it, I'd appreciate your help on quality control to make sure nothing going out of our doors is tainted, but that's up to you. I can't imagine smelling chemicals all day would be fun," Tim shrugged and rested his hands on his belt. Open, and definitely not putting his hands near weapons, no siree. "In the immediate future, I'd like you to be here tomorrow night when the techs come in to familiarize themselves with the new set up, so everyone gets an idea who they're working with. Surprises while surrounded by a bunch of chemicals is just *asking* for something to go horribly wrong. You'll be paid for your time, of course, probably hourly to start with while we figure out exactly how much work you'll need to do each month, but we can set up a salary once we know what we're dealing with. I can't promise benefits or anything *yet*, but if enough people express interest I'm sure I can figure something out.

“So,” Tim was a little nervous now. His pitch was good, but Jones was silent and still. It was the kind of stillness that reminded Tim of the disconnect between a flashing light and the wail of a siren. This might be about to get loud. “What you think? Are you interested?”

“You’re offering me... A management gig?” Jones sounded baffled.

A so-so gesture, since Tim didn’t *actually* want to sugarcoat this too much. “It’s still in an illegal drug operation, and we both know your presence can be a deterrent on its own, but in essence yeah. I’m asking you to run the lab and proverbial office here. I might hire on some other people for accounting stuff if things go well, but at least to start with I’d like you to make an effort to enter data into a computer system I’ll provide.

There, a flash of suspicion. Something about that last bit was wrong then. Dammit.

“I can’t really use computers. They’re too small.”

Oh, that was nothing, and Tim said as much. He could make a custom keyboard with larger, more durable keys if he couldn’t find one online. And he could just put a shell on a normal mouse to make it usable. No biggie.

Jones was very, very quiet, and while Tim couldn’t be sure, he

thought there might be something like *hope* in his expression.

He was still clearly suspicious though, and Tim couldn't blame him. Jones had been burned too many times to accept a good thing just like that. So. A bit of faith then.

Or as close as Tim could get these days.

"My name is Alvin Draper," Tim said, and it almost didn't feel like a lie. He stuck out a hand. "Would you be interested in doing business, Mister Jones?"

A beat. Then two.

And then Jones' large, scaly hand was closing around Tim's, and huh. Tim had never really noticed how warm Jones was before, that was neat.

"I'm very much interested, Mister Draper."

Perfect.

--

Tim was a little bit giddy on the way home, the rush of a successful business deal always a unique pep in his step. He couldn't justify pizza in the middle of the night, but it couldn't hurt to pick up a pint of ice cream from the corner store, right?

The lights flickered over peeling linoleum and the teenager behind the counter glanced over briefly before returning to their book. Admittedly getting anything off of the bottom to shelves from the freezer was just asking for their to be something very wrong with it, be it bugs or grime or on a very unlucky day rot, but at least it was only a couple of dollars for a pint of mint chocolate chip. And Tim deserved a little celebration. After all, now he could get the first batch of medication done tomorrow if things went well, get that to the pharmacy where they could start distribution, and then this project would finally be well and truly off the ground.

Finding a fence for his stolen goods could be a tomorrow task, and he already had an idea or two on how to go about that.

Ice cream paid for and already trying to figure out how best to track the movements of stray cats in the neighbourhood, Tim opened the door to his complex with his free hand, just in time to catch a sprinting child to the chest.

"Alvin, Alvin, there's someone looking for you!" Luke gasped, latching onto the front of Tim's sweater. "Jason told me to tell you not to come home tonight."

Tim grabbed Luke's shoulder and straightened him out. "Woah, it's okay Luke, you found me, it's okay. Let's go for a walk and you can tell me about who's looking for me. We'll eat this ice cream and it'll be alright."

Apparently his night wasn't over yet. Of course not.

Back into the street, Tim led them away from the main streets, heading towards the nearest park. Admittedly, Taylor Park was a green park which made it a little dangerous even at the best of times, but it was certainly no Robinson. It was probably fine.

"Alright, now tell me Luke, what happened?"

"I don't really know, Jason was picking up groceries and he heard some guy asking about you. He knew your name, which he thought was weird but you have been kinda busy so he figured it was fine. Except the deli worker he was talking to pointed him in Jason's direction, said he worked with you." Tim would really prefer it if locals didn't go around suggesting he had a gang full of children at his beck and call, but he could recognize a losing battle when he saw one.

He just nodded instead, offering Luke the ice cream. No spoons unfortunately, but better than no ice cream at all.

"Thanks. So then the guy comes over to Jason before he can book it, and introduces himself as Malone, I think? And asks him what kind of work you have him do. Jay snapped something about running

groceries, and that's when Maggie showed up and told him to leave her grandson alone, and then they both headed home and Jason told me to go find you and I did and- oooh brain freeze." Luke cut himself off, grabbing onto the right side of his head, curling into himself as if that could hide the way he was tearing up.

Tim carefully took the ice cream back before it could fall, and placed a hand on his back, rubbing in slow circles. "Hey, it's okay. You guys did great, thank you so much. I think I know the guy Jason met, and he's probably just worried. You probably shouldn't talk to him if you can avoid it, but he's not gonna hurt you."

Apparently Bruce had pulled out Matches Malone to try and track him down. That could be a problem.

But for now, Tim was going to try and calm down this kid, enjoy the last of his victory ice cream, and then get the both of them out of here before those stems he could see creeping towards them got too close.

Chapter End Notes

> Afternoon folks!! (Because I have begun to unironically use Howdy in my day to day and I should probably do something about that)
>
> This one is a little extra long just to make up for being a few days later than I wanted it to be. The convo with Croc was really sticking for me. But we got there, and I'm mostly happy with the ways this one developed! Plot progress that involves almost no crimes? In my Tim Being A Bit Of A Criminal fic? It's more likely than you'd think!! Both on and off screen Events are happening, and I theoretically have the rest of the fic planned out. Theoretically. It's in bullet points.
>
> In podcast news, this week's episode was all about bad Marvel characters (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-26ezOIUD4c), and next week's will be about the Robins but specifically the

worst versions of each of them. If you haven't heard of Ian Wayne, I urge you not to google him. It will hurt your soul. Also, we stream twice a week now which is interesting. Mondays and Thursdays at twitch.tv/nerdcrusade so if that's something you find interesting we're always happy to have People?

Edit: I almost forgot to mention Gotham City Monsters #2!!!! It's an anthology with several good stories including one about Batcow, but my favourite is one about Jones where he Tries to apply for jobs and keeps getting turned away, and you get to see him in a suit with a briefcase!!! Yes this was my primary motivation for what I'm doing with him here, and no i have do not have any regrets :)

Thank you all so much for all of the lovely comments, I promise I still read and value all of them even if I'm not really replying anymore for Dumb Brain reasons. Honestly, you're all the reason I keep writing and why eventually I'm gonna get through this thing. Thank you and have a wonderful week <3333

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite his best intention, it was going to be a couple of days before Tim could really get started looking on his cat tracking. He had orientation with the lab techs, a fair amount of paperwork for the Kelly, carefully monitoring how he was feeling since those dress shoes had done *nothing* to protect his open wounds from the garbage juice, and the last thing Tim wanted was another infection, and, of course, trying to avoid 'Matches Malone.'

That last one was... A trial.

For all that Jason's advice of staying away from his apartment *was* good in theory, in actuality, Tim couldn't risk Bruce breaking in while he wasn't there and seeing all of his planning and also very obvious future tech. And while Tim *could* move into one of his safe houses full time, that would mean finding a way to direct hungry kids his way and also that he would have to leave Maggie and the girls behind, and Tim. Didn't want to do that.

So, alternatives.

First things first, Tim had moved all of his potentially incriminating possessions out of his apartment and into the weird warehouse where he had found the dolly and he had dropped off the paperwork to purchase the building with Kelly that afternoon. Of course, he had been forced to do the moving at ten at night when he knew Batman would be doing nightly warm-up exercises with Robin. While it was always possible that Batman might make Robin stay in and head out

early by himself, Tim was willing to gamble on those odds, so much so that he even brought Redbird along for a late night walk.

Maybe he shouldn't have been so sure it would be fine.

As Tim watched Batman's arcing shadow swing over head, he couldn't help but wonder if Dick had a test tomorrow. Hacking into Gotham Academy's system probably wouldn't work as a way of tracking that sort of thing, given how few of *Tim's* teachers had bothered to put all of their in-class schedules onto the servers and that was years later when computers were actually integrated into classrooms. Sort of, anyways.

Now, what were the odds B would ignore him as Batman and try to come back after him as Matches versus the odds he would pounce on this very obvious chance to poke his nose in Tim's business?

A sucker's bet, really. He'd probably do both.

Tim was just glad he'd already dropped off and hidden the important contents at the first warehouse and was now on his way to deliver a few things and some advanced wages to thank the returning techs for their patience in letting Tim sort things out. Also some cookies because Maggie and the girls had insisted he take half of their last batch. Batman seeing cookies wouldn't be a big deal. The couple of thousand dollars in cash, on the other hand, might raise some questions.

Redbird hadn't caught on to just why Tim had stopped yet, and was poking at his shins before scampering ahead and looking back, before slowly making her way back to try again. It was unbearably cute, and if Tim's hands weren't full, he would have no choice but to scoop her up for some well earned cuddles. Alas, it was not to be. Instead, Tim was about to have to deal with a much less pleasant creature of the night.

Tim was once again forced to acknowledge the artistry inherent in being Batman. B had perched himself on a sputtering lamppost, angled just so, that his point eared shadow, cast by a steadier warehouse light above him, fell onto the cracked concrete ahead, naturally drawing the eye along the shadow and up the post right to the dark figure crouching overhead.

Ten points for style, and an added five for the utility in that if Tim tried to run, not only would his bags and dog slow him down but Batman would be able to simply jump on him with fairly little effort. So just fleeing the scene to avoid a conversation he really didn't want to have was out.

Rather than protecting the dufflebags and keeping them close, thus drawing attention to their contents, Tim gently placed them on the ground beside Redbird, and leveled his gaze at Batman. While he very dearly wanted to ask if he was lost, anything to break the tension a little and give him a gauge on Batman's mood, speaking first at this particular point would risk being too cavalier, and Tim didn't need Batman knowing he wasn't scared of him just yet. That could raise too many questions.

So he waited, hands itching, and fuck it. He was gonna hold his dog. If he was going to seem flighty and mostly disinterested in the bags' contents or lack thereof, then picking up Redbird was as good a sign as any that he wanted to leave and he wanted to do it *fast.* Maybe

Batman would catch the cue and bite, unwilling to risk Tim bolting, even if it would be pointless anyways.

Sure enough, Batman dropped from the post as a mass of darkness, and while the warehouse light caught on the points of his cowl, the flickering light behind him kept his face almost entirely in shadow. Another five points for drama.

"What are you doing here." It was barely a question, and if Tim wasn't used to B's mannerisms, and couldn't *see* him walking towards him, he might almost wonder if he was being spoken to at all. But as it was, he was too painfully familiar with Batman trying to keep his emotional distance from someone. Apparently some things never changed.

As always, a little bit of truth, a little bit of misdirection, and that should do it on the Lying to Batman front. Maybe then he could carry on his day and pretend this never happened.

"I'm here to drop some stuff off and do some work for a client. They need it by tomorrow morning, and I hate getting up early, so here I am," Tim shrugged, anxiously stroking Redbird’s ears. No need to mention the client was actually himself, sort of.

Batman remained largely inscrutable, but interestingly, his fingertips twitched, like he wanted his hands on a particular puzzle so he could take it apart. Or, more worryingly, like he was debating how best to pull the truth from some underling that wasn't cooperating.

"You're not wearing your father's ring."

Abort, abort, lie at risk of collapsing, get his attention on literally anything else.

Tim tried to laugh it off, awkwardly scratching under Redbird's chin so he didn't have to look at him. After all, the consequences of getting caught here would be a lot worse than being grounded from patrol. "Yeah, well after I had to dig through garbage for three hours to find it, I decided maybe it'd be best to keep it at home where I wasn't going to go losing it again. Unless someone," he lifted Redbird and made eye contact with her, as she cocked her head, confused. "Tries to eat it again despite it looking nothing like the brand of treats she gets."

Everyone loved cute dogs, even Batman, and Redbird was the cutest. As if to prove it, she licked Tim's nose.

Ew. Perfect.

Without actually moving his gaze, Tim did his best to study Batman, fuzzy as his peripheral vision was. Another twitch, though this one was more like that moment of indecision when Ace was begging for pets and Bruce was torn between dog time and finishing whatever he was working on.

Distraction semi-successful then. Time to capitalize on it.

“Look, mister Bats guy,” a third twitch, this one with a hint of dismay in it. Hilarious. “I need to get this stuff dropped off so I can actually get to sleep some time before tomorrow. So I’m just gonna go, and I’d really appreciate if you stopped being a massive stalker in my direction.”

Tim was fully aware of the irony in asking Batman to stop stalking him. Actually. That was probably something to think about. Tiny Tim would be hitting the streets in pursuit of his heroes sometime in the next couple of months, if he hadn’t already. And the combined stupid luck of two Tims would almost certainly force them to interact unless measures were taken.

Hm. A problem for Future Tim.

And of course, instead of acquiescing to Tim’s demand that B had no reason to know was hypocritical, he just confirmed he had, in fact, been stalking him. “You don’t work in a kitchen.”

Okay, so Batman was poking at various holes in his lies, this was fine. Totally fine and not at all painfully nostalgic. Tim certainly wasn’t thinking about how much easier it was to lie to Batman when he knew he could trust you with his life. Or what it was like to be able to trust him in return. After all, thinking about those kind of things would be self-indulgent and would probably get him caught.

What was the play here? Embarrassment might be enough of a redirect to hide the lie, but it certainly wouldn’t stop further investigation. Unless there was, theoretically, nothing to investigate.

Time to solve a mystery and bury one lie with another.

"I was covering a shift for a buddy, since we look kind of alike," Tim answered, trying a grin and letting it come out a grimace. Sure this lie hadn't worked the first time when he was at the Iceberg Lounge, but it was a new day and its not like Batman had *heard* that failure. "Let me tell you, I do *not* regret walking away from the service industry."

"You were at the Iceberg Lounge that night," Batman countered, neither accepting nor rejecting his explanation. The next question was whether that was knowledge or a guess. Had his investigation on-site somehow found incriminating evidence? What had Tim left behind that could possibly indicate his presence?

Oh shit.

The pants. The ones that he had been wearing on that rooftop that didn't fit and the ones he had stuffed in the bathroom garbage. If Batman had seen those, it would be child's play to tie the two together. This was still salvageable, but Tim had made this problem for himself by being sloppy. Great.

Tim wrinkled his nose and curled his fingers into Redbird's coat. "Unfortunately. Can't say working for a mobster is my idea of a good time, but apparently it comes with decent benefits and other than my little charade it *is* legal work. I wasn't about to let my friend lose his job."

Batman's head tilted slightly, a small movement that warped the shadows across his cowl even further and catching a flicker of light on his eerie whiteouts. Another two style points, and one for instinctive use of optics. "You keep mentioning this 'friend' but I don't think he exists. What's his name?"

Apparently this was indeed where Dick had picked up that habit of rudely pointing out things that were true. Tim scowled and it was only half an act. "None of your damn business. You think I'm gonna tell you who he is so you can stalk him too? Fuck off. I've got better things to do than lie to you." That was even true. There were plenty of lies Tim needed to tell if he was going to take care of his to-do list, and other than keeping him out of the way, talking to Batman barely made the cut.

To punctuate his words, Tim gently set Redbird back on the ground and scooped up his dufflebags. "Have a good night Batman. Thanks for the tip about the truck."

Walking away with his back to his opponent was always a risk, but since this particular spar had been all verbal, Tim decided to leave before Bruce could round of his score to a neat twenty five when he let his flair for the dramatic escalate things into a kidnapping and full-scale interrogation. Tim was already bracing himself for a run-in with Matches later. Nosy bastard incapable of minding his own business.

Tim missed him so much.

Redbird, best girl that she was, followed without prompting, leaning on Tim's leg as they walked, suffusing him with some much needed warmth. Despite her sweet attempts at comfort, his chest ached and

his mind was racing. He needed to get Batman off his tail so he could go to the lab without exposing the entire operation. His best bet would be to break line of sight and go somewhere stupid enough Batman wouldn't bother to check there.

Normally, Tim would probably go up, since at the very least that wouldn't be Batman's first place to look for a sneaky civilian, but between their last meeting being *on* a fire escape, indicating his willingness to climb things, and Redbird who couldn't climb at all, that wasn't going to happen. Down wasn't exactly much of an option either, since there wasn't easy sewer access here and the time it would take Tim to pop up a manhole cover would be enough for B to restore line of sight and then that would just be wildly suspicious.

Which meant Tim had to get creative.

Banking on Batman's general equipment not including thermal vision would *also* be a fool's gamble, so Tim would have to hide behind or under a vent. At groundish level. Which would be one thing if there was, say, a restaurant somewhere around here, but alas. Industrial and warehouse districts weren't exactly known for their prolific food venues. But maybe if he could find a production warehouse, there would be some kind of exhaust vent. Preferably one that didn't stink too badly, but Tim wasn't going to hold out hope.

Nope, nope, pretty sure that one was just a giant rat's nest at this point- there, that one would hopefully do the trick. The not-quite-a-smokestack on top hopefully meant the worst of the fumes would be contributing to Gotham's smog rather than the entirely probable ongoing damage to Tim's lungs.

Tim balanced on the balls of his feet and scooped Redbird awkwardly into his arms between the two bags. He had maybe fifteen seconds to get into cover before he was most certainly screwed and going to be stalked for the rest of the night. So Tim booked it as quietly as he could towards the appropriate dumpster and *bingo*, some kind of vent spilling hot air right next to it. Thank goodness for industrial standardization. Juggling a truly awkward number of things to be carrying, Tim levered the dumpster open, took a moment to regret his life choices, and hopped in, tucking himself against the wall closest to the vent. That ought to confuse his shape enough to let him fly under Batman's radar at least for long enough for him to move on so Tim could get away to the meeting he wasn't quite late for yet.

And then it was a waiting game. No sound, no indication that he was even being followed, just the rumble of the vent, the buzz of cheap lighting fixtures echoing strangely in the dumpster, and his and Redbird's breathing.

In the dark, with a soft warmth pressed to his chest, canvas scrunched up against his arms, and the sounds of nothing at all outside, Tim was struck by a sudden and bone-deep exhaustion. It wasn't a new feeling, but he hadn't had to deal with it for a while either. The normally quiet and easily ignored voice in the back of his head was urging him to settle down and just *rest* for a while, as if that was remotely feasible given his schedule and the fact he was *literally in a dumpster*. Tired or not, there was shit to do and dumpster naps were a great way to wake up with rats in unspeakable places.

He could sleep when the job was done.

Redbird seemed to disagree, snuggling her little face into the crook of Tim's neck and letting him feel each little *huff* of air against his skin.

Had it been long enough for Batman to pass yet? It had to be, right? Batman was *quick* and Tim hadn't gone that far before taking cover. Surely he had gotten far enough that Tim had some room to sneak off before Batman realized he had missed something and doubled back.

Go time, then.

With an appropriate amount of caution given *Batman* was in the area, Tim cracked the lid of the dumpster and took as much of a look around as he could. No immediately obvious spooky stalkers, at least. Climbing out of a pile of industrial garbage with his hands full and a sweet little puppy in the crook of his arm was exactly as awkward as climbing in had been, but at least this didn't feel quite as rushed. By the time Tim was standing steadily and there was no sign of a swooping not-father figure, he decided to call this one a win and get to the meeting before he actually *was* late.

With Batman at least temporarily out of the picture, but surely around to be poking his armoured nose where it didn't belong, Tim would have to seriously consider whether or not to add some cheaty future tech security to the warehouse where he was storing his more damning gear. On the one hand, it would lower the odds of anyone stumbling across it by accident, but on the other it would make the location stand out to anyone who *was* looking and knew what they were looking for.

Choices, choices.

In his arms, Redbird was waking up from her brief nap, and had

already started trying to wriggle free. As soon as she touched down, she was clearly thrilled at an evening walk, not straying too far into the shadows before bounding back to Tim's side. Her tail sweeping side to side, slow and steady the whole time. Hopefully she wouldn't react too poorly to Jones. No need to poking at the man's insecurities.

As he approached the lab, Tim was pleased to only faintly here voices and movement. They weren't dumb enough to deliberately draw attention to themselves. He'd have to see about soundproofing the place to make discretion easier.

The door opened with a grating creak, something else to consider fixing, and the already low conversations cut off. Tim was glad he had his hood up; between it and the weak overhead lights his face ought to be mostly in shadow.

Now, while he could address the room as a whole and go for the 'companionable boss' approach, combined with his age and admittedly unintimidating size, that communication style might undermine his authority before things could really even get started. So, a power play instead, one that would set the hierarchy here without making Tim seem entirely like an unapproachable asshole. He didn't want to be what they were used to working with, but if he wanted this to work he couldn't let them walk all over him either.

"Evening, Jones. How's everybody settling in?" Tim asked, directing the bulk of his attention to Jones while keeping an eye on the reactions of the eight returning techs. If Tim could make this clearly worth their while, word would spread and hopefully other interested parties would come forward.

Surely it couldn't be *that* hard to find people with some chemistry experience looking for work. Not in Gotham, at least.

Jones may not have been wearing a shirt, something that Tim would probably need to address at some point, but his bearing wasn't that of a bloodthirsty monster, or even a regular monster. If anything, his first reaction to being called upon was a full body twitch that he quickly smothered by squaring his massive shoulders. "Everyone agrees the workstations are good, but plenty of people have questions that I figured should wait until you were here to answer them."

That wasn't too bad, clear professional, and only a slight twang to his words like he was *trying* to seem like more than something that crawled out of a gutter. Tim could appreciate the intent, but the effort sent a pang through his chest, that Jones thought he needed to be something other than himself to have a job and be happy was... Not ideal. Certainly not sustainable, though it would be absurd to deny that Jones had a lot of personal growth to go through if he wanted to be stable. But that wasn't growth Tim could do for him. All he could do was create an environment to do that growing in, and cross his fingers.

A nod, and Tim let the bags drop to the floor, sending up puffs of dust as they landed. Redbird, of course, immediately climbed onto one and apparently decided this was a perfect place to stretch out her little toes. No visible reaction to Jones, which was probably the best Tim could have hoped for.

"Well, to preempt those questions, I've brought a few tokens of good will. A down payment for everyone's patience and as an investment on the future of our collaboration, and some cookies that are available to everyone but will be on your desk to avoid contamination." Tim turned to the rest of the techs, Jones looking a little less fidgety and like he might lash out in a panic.

“For tonight, I’d like everyone to follow the instructions at their workstations, as we need to get some sample product finished today so I can take it to a distributor to confirm the quality and cement that working relationship. All of you will be making different product, but feel free to collaborate if you’re working on something outside of your particular expertise. Mister Jones is here to keep things running smoothly, so if you have any issues, you can direct your questions to him, and if he can’t answer them he’ll contact me.”

An aborted shrug that Tim covered up by sweeping his hands behind him where he clasped them together. Giving speeches, instructions and sales pitches were all *technically* in Tim’s wheelhouse of skills, but there was something about the suspicious weight of their eyes and the sharp reality that this was their livelihoods he was putting on the line for *his* crazy plan. The least he could offer was a little bit of hope.

“Long term, I’m looking to set up salaries rather than hourly pay, possibly benefits if I can figure that out, so if you know anyone who works in insurance, let me know and I’ll get in contact. I’m also open to hiring more staff once we’ve secured a distributor, so if you know anyone with experience or steady hands and a willingness to learn, feel free to pass their contact information to Jones and he will make sure I hear about it. Hours are semi-flexible, though you’ll need to discuss any time off or changes in schedule with Jones.”

One of the techs stepped forward, and Tim pointedly didn’t let himself tense. Redbird perked her head up, and Jones’ fingers twitched, but he didn’t let himself focus on either of those things. Open, professional, and just a little intimidating; that’s what he needed to be. Looks of disdain didn’t translate well when their target couldn’t *see* them, but Tim tilted his head just enough to disrupt the set of his hood so that this young woman could *feel* his attention.

“Who the fuck even *are* you?” Her hands were shaking, and the skin clung a little too tightly to her cheekbones. The last week of uncertainty couldn’t have been good for her, and Tim was the one who put her through that.

Tim let his chin dip, taking refuge in his hood. Pity would get him no where, and guilt was very rarely productive. Bruce was a shining example of that second one. If Tim was going to be making mistakes, at the very least they would be his own.

“Well, assuming you agree and are willing to sign a contract once I’ve had the chance to write one, I’m your employer.” There was absolutely no way Tim was going to be giving even his fake name out for this kind of thing if he could help it. Though with *Alvin Draper* on a handful of deeds and mortgage documents, there was probably only so long he could hide it. He held the one-sided eye contact for another moment, daring her to ask for his name again. Boundaries now meant time saved later.

Her lip curled, but she didn’t advance further, just swayed slightly and clenched and unclenched her fists.

Wordlessly and without breaking eye-contact, Tim crouched and unzipped the dufflebag that Redbird wasn’t using as a bed. He reached in and pulled out the paper bag Maggie had foisted on him when he had been grabbing his things. Everyone but Jones tensed, presumably because he was the only one who could smell the bags’ contents.

Tim stood, slow and easy, and pulled out an oatmeal cookie, nice and

obvious with each movement. He paused a beat, letting everyone take their fill, before breaking off a small piece and putting it in his own mouth. Then, he took a step forward, towards the woman still wound whip tight, and offered it to her.

For a moment, and then another, she seemed more confused than anything. But Tim could be patient, and eventually she reached out and took it, only a little awkwardly.

Tim opened the bag further, letting everyone get a decent look at its contents.

“Alright, if that’s all, everyone take a cookie and let’s get to work.”

--

Heading home with dufflebags notably lighter, but significantly more delicate than they had been on the walk down, Tim tried not to appear too visibly giddy.

He had the first round of tester medications, he could take those to the pharmacy in the morning, and finally start *helping* people. Or at least, helping people other than the horde of children that continued to pester him with things like *hanging out on his couch* and *trying to steal his plastic cups*. But they barely counted, it was basic human decency to look after kids in need.

Tim was so caught up in trying to figure out if there was a way to steal back the Barbie cup that he was pretty sure Jason had somehow managed to smuggle out of his apartment (it was a matter of principle, though he was fairly certain they had made some kind of game out of trying to steal things and his normally inevitable stopping them), he didn't realize that Redbird hadn't returned from her last foray into the darkness until he heard a startled yelp from the nearest alley.

Oh absolutely not.

Flat out sprinting wasn't quite an option, since he couldn't risk the medication getting too jostled and something breaking, but that was *his dog*. Redbird was always so quiet, if something had managed to get her to make a sound like that, high and startled and *seeking*, it couldn't have been anything good and Tim would be damned before he let her get hurt.

He skidded around the corner, hood sliding off and gravel sliding under his feet, already looking for a huddled mass of fur, fearing blood and already thinking of how to pay back whatever damage had been done to-

It was a cat. Perched on a trash can and angrily rumbling like its skinny life depended on it. And beneath it, Redbird looked small and sad, whining nearly too quietly to hear.

Well this was a stroke of inconvenient luck.

Lucky because judging by the too sleek fur but still slightly-too-thin limbs, this particular kitty had recently been in contact with one Selina Kyle, which meant she was probably in the area and if Tim was even luckier this cat might head her way soon.

Inconvenient, because he couldn't exactly stash his bags and dog somewhere and hope no one would steal them. Redbird might be okay, though he wouldn't bet on it, but the bags would be goners for sure, and he would either have to push the techs to work faster tomorrow and hope to get to the pharmacy before it closed, or he'd risk missing his window and breaking their trust.

But if he let this cat pass him by, he'd just be back here again after dropping things off and then he'd be basically back at square one; combing the neighbourhood for any signs of feline activity.

In short, he was probably screwed.

Except... He knew the area pretty well by this point. And while it was well after operational hours, he knew the Vecellios lived above their pizzeria and it probably wasn't late enough for *everyone* to be asleep. Well. At least not Sam, since teenagers' sleep schedules were always ridiculous and dumb.

If he moved fast enough, the cat might still be in the area when he got back, or at the very least wouldn't have gotten far enough that he couldn't track it.

Totally foolproof.

Edging forward, trying not to aggravate the already pissed off cat any further, Tim entered the alley and tried to call Redbird over. She didn't seem to hear him, big eyes staying unerringly fixed on the cat over her head. Understandable, given her history of violence with other animals, but it still ached to be ignored so completely.

Not the priority.

There was only so close he could get without sending the cat scrambling away, but Redbird wasn't moving. She was just crouching there, whining and shaking so minutely Tim wouldn't have noticed if she wasn't on top of a wrapper of some kind that crinkled with every movement. His poor girl.

A whistle, soft calls of her name, gently clicking his fingers, all got no reaction. The cat wasn't moving either, but it hadn't stopped its aggressive growl, and Tim was a little impressed by its lung capacity if nothing else.

"Come on darling, look at me," Tim murmured, gently scratching his fingers against the concrete. "I'm right here pretty girl."

Finally, what felt like a millennia but was probably only a minute or so later, Redbird twitched in his direction and the pitch of the cat

went from engine rumble to dentist drill, a sudden enough change to send Redbird scrabbling right into Tim's arms. With every inch backwards he moved, the cat settled down a little more, until it was just glaring at them from its apparently comfortable seat atop the garbage can.

Trying not to startle the finicky animal, Tim backed out of the alley and then turned and ran for the pizzeria.

Getting Sam's attention involved yet another awkward maneuvering with his hands full to get up to the second story, and then a very close call as he wiggle along the side of the building to get to the kitchen window so he could get her to look up from where she was on the phone with a lamp on.

To say she was surprised would have been an understatement, but she managed not to wake anyone up, so Tim called it a win.

The conversation was brief, thankfully Sam was more than happy to take Redbird of his hands she she wasn't, quote, 'twenty feet in the air what the fuck," and then it was much easier to negotiate two favours in exchange for her holding on to the dufflebags and keeping them safe until morning.

Tim pointedly did not worry about the kind of favours she'd be asking, since he had enough on his plate as it was. Future problems.

For now, he dropped off the building and caught himself in a roll,

throwing Sam a cursory wave as he headed back towards the alley where he hoped the cat was still hanging around.

Which of course it wasn’t, because cats bowed to no whims but their own.

Okay, how far could a cat get in the ten minutes he had been gone?

Well, a cat’s top speed was just under thirty miles per hour, but they could only maintain that for fairly short distances, so realistically it was probably moving maybe half that and that was assuming there was no up or down motion to slow it down. And there was plenty of up and down to go, either up the fire escape, or down past the rest of the bins and squirming under the fence at the end of the alley.

Hm. Well personal preference meant Tim was going up and hoping to catch a glimpse of any sneaky felines from above. It wasn’t *that* dark, he’d see any large movements.

Probably.

Chapter End Notes

> Every day I wake up and go "maybe today I'll get what I want done in my latest chapter so the plot can move forward at the predicted pace" and then I write a whole bunch of words that Don't Do That.
>
> Still! If I didn't like this chapter I wouldn't be posting it, so at least my nonsense is Good nonsense. And really, isn't that all anyone can ask for in these trying times?

Tim's getting everything up and running now, baby! He's got drugs, he's got property, he's got Batman's interest! Good for him! Or maybe not, depending on who you ask. I was Planning to get to Catwoman this chapter, but here we are. Catwoman-less. Because this thing is over 5k as is. It'll happen, eventually.

In other news, this week's podcast episode was a showdown between the Legion of Super Pets and the Pet Avengers, and we had a local comic shop owner as a guest! So feel free to check that out (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLm2bKKVDZ0) if that sounds fun to you. Coming out this Wednesday will be one on crappy video game movies, so brace yourselves for that :p

A fair warning, I'm currently sitting on the fence between fandoms, so whether next month this gets another chapter or I write something Completely Different is currently up to fate. Fingers crossed for all of our sakes' that DC sticks hard enough to keep me productive here.

Thank you as always for reading, I hope you're all having a great week <333

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After maybe twenty minutes and traveling four blocks, Tim was willing to admit he may have overestimated his skills.

Cats were *sneaky*, and this particular feline was a slippery bastard indeed. There were a couple of times where Tim *thought* he had found the beast, only to have to very abruptly fend off some overly large rats that had nested behind a pile of trash bags or in an air conditioning unit. He made the executive decision to not wonder if someone had been trying to *use* that air conditioner, since some horrors were simply not worth thinking about.

Maybe he should give up on that cat and try and find another one, or just accept that this particular venture was a loss and head back to the Vecellio's to collect his dog and drugs. He may be wearing his tunic and belts under his hoodie, but he had opted out of the boots and he was sorely missing their grip now. Perching on rooftops in normal work boots just wasn't the same, and Tim had been forced to pause multiple times to dislodge some gravel from the treads to not worsen their already mediocre grip.

Tim sighed, letting a hand slide under his hood to ruffle his hair. "If I were a stray cat, where would I go to get away from a weirdo chasing me?"

"I certainly hope that's not the reason you're out here by yourself, kid."

Speak of the fur babies and the mother will appear. Apparently.

Tim did *not* fall off the roof at the sudden voice behind him, but that was more a testament to years of desensitization to his own startle reflex than anything else. Instead, he turned sharply to get a look at her. He was about to ask a favour, eye contact was going to be important.

“Miss Kyle.” Professional address, but just a touch personal enough to make a point. After all, it was Catwoman standing in front of him, *not* Selina Kyle. He knew who she was and wasn’t afraid to exploit that to get what he wanted. “I was actually looking for you.”

She cocked a hip, letting her whip uncoil into a quiet threat even as she smirked. “Well you found me and I don’t babysit, so what’ll it be?” Tim was abruptly reminded that she was, give or take, around Bruce’s age, which now meant she was only a handful of years older than *him*. And she knew better than to underestimate Gotham’s youth. So he might *actually* be registering as potentially dangerous, for possibly the first time since landing in the past.

Holy shit.

Weird.

Best to make this quick then.

“I can see you’re in the middle of something so I’ll be brief; I’m looking for a fence, and you know the best of the best.”

And there, that shifted her intent and the angle of her whip, no longer quite so ready to snap out and force him off the rooftop. Now she was sizing him up like she was evaluating competition. Or maybe like she was deciding what kind of idiot she had stumbled across. “Now why should I introduce you to my friends? I can’t have people thinking rats and rookies can use me to get a leg up. I *might* be convinced to take some of it off your hands, if you’re desperate.”

Fishing was an odd behaviour for a cat, but that’s what she was doing; both for information on who he had hit and for his situation. More importantly for Tim’s present concerns was the fact she hadn’t actually offered to *pay* for his goods.

So he scoffed. “And let you take all the credit for *my* hard work? Not a chance. I’m willing to give you a cut of the pay for my first transaction with anyone you put me in contact with. Sound fair?”

“I’m not known for playing fair,” Selina curled a lip but it wasn’t enough to draw Tim’s attention from where she also curled her diamond-tipped claws. Glass wasn’t the only thing those could cut. “But if you can convince me you’re not a pig-in-rat’s clothing, maybe I’ll let you keep thirty percent.”

“Thirty percent is a joke, but its a funnier one than suggesting I’m a cop. You think there’s a single cop in Gotham who would come *here* in the middle of the night, looking for *you?* They’re stupid, but not usually actively suicidal,” Tim snapped, fighting the urge to cross his arms. Better to keep them loose and at his sides, in case Selina decided she didn’t like his tone. “If you want a favour, you can just say so.”

And there it was, the flex of a wrist that maybe would have been hidden in another costume clear as day through her old, new at the moment Tim supposed, purple suit. He had about five seconds before her patience ran out, so of course he chose to use that time to run his mouth some more. “No murder. I’m open to negotiation on most other points, but I’m not killing anyone for you.”

“Not a point in your favour on not being a cop, brat,” Selina hummed, shifting again but still not anywhere near as calm as Tim would like her to be for this conversation. “But I suppose if you’d be willing to... *inconvenience* some of our boys in blue, I might be willing to believe you’re not one of them.”

Ah. Selina may be framing it like she wanted him to prove himself, but what she was *really* looking for was leverage. He knew her name, so she wanted something on him. And she was probably looking to steal something tonight and wanted him to distract the cops. Ought to be doable enough, though Tim wished he knew where Batman had scarpered off to after their confrontation. Then, he could go mess with the cops, hopefully gain enough of Selina’s trust to get a fence, *and* stop a crime from actually occurring.

Too bad with Tim’s current finding-things record for the evening he probably wasn’t going to have time to track him down. Actually.

“And is there a time limit and ideal location for this ‘inconvenience’ you’d like me to cause?” Tim asked, raising a brow to make it oh so clear he knew the real reason she wanted the cops focused on something in particular.

Selina grinned, all edges and amusement, and Tim was counting that as a win until further notice. “An hour, west side. Make it pretty, won’t you? I want to hear all about it tomorrow.”

She moved towards the edge of the roof, but Tim wasn’t quite done with her yet.

“Before I go attracting entirely too much attention to myself,” and wasn’t that going to be fun to deal with without putting any of his associates or the kids at risk, “I need a guarantee that you’ll get me in contact with a fence. No work without compensation, and all that.”

Maybe this wasn’t the best angle to try, but Selina had always respected hard work if nothing else, and hopefully if Tim could avoid seeming entirely like a naive possible-cop she would give him *something* he could use.

Selina seemed to think about it, a claw running up and down the handle of her whip, just gentle enough not to split the leather. It was a fine line, but she was pretty good at walking those. Despite himself, Tim vaguely wondered if she and Bruce had entered the Robin-traumatizing make-outs stage of their relationship yet, or whether they were still in their competitive will-they-won’t-they days.

But that wasn't his business, and Tim had done his time being scarred by that relationship already.

After just long enough for Tim to start to think his gamble wasn't paying off, Selina finally spoke. "I'll give you the first half of a phone number now, and you'll find the second half on this rooftop after the job is done."

"I thought scavenger hunts were Nygma's shtick not yours," Tim hummed, resisting the urge to catalogue every piece of garbage on the rooftop to make identifying any alterations easier later. First he had to figure out a clever and hopefully not *too* illegal idea to keep the attention of a decent contingent of the GCPD, and later he could come back to, hopefully, collect his spoils. And if Selina decided to stiff him, well. He'd be back out here looking for her tomorrow and he'd have to find a way to make a point about *payment*. "Fine. We have a deal."

Neither of them made a move to shake on it, Tim because he didn't like letting people put sharpened objects near his pulse points, and Selina presumably because he had cooties or something. Instead, it was with a nod and a string of five numbers that Selina leapt from the rooftop and if Tim wasn't who he was, he probably would have lost sight of her after the first twist into darkness. As it was, he was a little preoccupied.

What to do as a distraction?

Cops loved explosions. Well. No they didn't, but they always turned up at them anyways which was close enough for Tim's purposes. Unfortunately, Tim hadn't exactly prepped any demolitions for this kind of thing, and he wasn't willing to risk injuries or property

damage to people just trying to live their lives. He also didn't really feel like getting branded a terrorist if things went really south.

So, alternatives.

He could try and incite some kind of mid-scale violence, get a big fight to break out in the streets, but Tim hadn't forgotten that kind of nonsense had killed Stephanie, and again, what right did Tim have to put others in harms way for his own convenience? If he riled up local gangs, someone *was* going to die. Which meant he'd have to go smaller. But not too small, since he did still need to prove his competence to Selina if he wanted her to follow through on their deal.

What he needed, was something that would make a *splash*.

Now wasn't that an idea.

And all he'd really need was a big wrench.

Despite the temptation to go pick up his goods and dog from Sam sooner rather than later, to make sure they were safe before he initiated any nonsense, it was probably a better call to wait until morning and see if he could get one of the chipmunks to go grab them. A nice, simple assignment that would give them a chance to go for a walk with Redbird and keep them in contact with trustworthy people in the neighbourhood. Just in case.

Getting himself a really big wrench was going to be the most time consuming part of this whole process, but lucky for Tim the safe house construction project had taught him a thing or two about acquiring tools on short notice. Namely, that it was best left to the experts.

First stop, a sneaky and industrious child.

There were always enterprising youths willing to earn a quick buck in Crime Alley, but Tim was on a timeline and earning trust of any particular youth would be tricky. Better to go with a tried-and-true source.

Tim would love to say he had been more respectful of people's privacy in the past than he had been in his own time, that in the interest of keeping his head down he had mostly minded his own business, but that would be a lie, and not even a useful one. After the first time Jason had come to dinner, Tim had spent an afternoon figuring out where and how exactly he and his mother were living.

Catherine Todd was already an addict, struggling to make ends meet for her and her son while her husband swung in and out of prison like a pendulum, but she was still clearly trying and she loved Jason. She didn't let the heroin control her, for the most part, though Tim was already trying to build a timeline of use and estimated tolerance, and she seemed to at least try to hide it from her kid. Jason was too sharp for that, but the effort counted for something. Their home wasn't always a safe place for Jason to be, but it sometimes it was a happy one. So Tim had kept his mouth shut and his eyes open, ready to help if things took a turn for the worse, but not willing to drag a boy away from his mother quite yet.

Instead he was going to *borrow* a boy away from his mother. Just for the evening.

Which was how he found himself climbing into a smoke-stained one bedroom apartment in the middle of the night.

It wasn't that Tim minded making a habit of knocking on windows, it was just the glass on Jason's window was splintered and reinforced with cardboard, and a knock that would definitely be heard may very well break the whole thing which would be both attention-grabbing *and* rude. Carefully opening the window with years of dexterity honed from training and video games and slipping inside was safer for everyone involved.

Jason was where Tim had expected, sleeping on a futon in what passed for a living room. Tim was pretty sure it was Willis that insisted he and Catherine got the bedroom, though given that he was currently in Blackgate, Tim suspected Catherine might use the semblance of privacy to get high. Good news for Jason coming with him tonight, not so good news for the timeline on her health.

Speaking of health, even by the dim light filtering in around the edges of the cardboard, Jason didn't look well. Not terrible, but a little flushed, a little twitchy like even in sleep he couldn't stop himself from trying to dispel the discomfort. If Tim had the time he would just let him sleep it off, find someone else to help him, but he'd already burned ten minutes getting here.

He'd find a way to make it up to him.

Gentle as he could, Tim placed a hand on Jason's shoulder and squeezed.

Jason blinked up at him, confused and warm and Tim carefully tucked the softness that sparked in his chest away somewhere safe for another time. The moment stretched, languorous and long, and then it melted and Jason's gaze cleared and fell sharply to Tim's hand, still on his shoulder.

He didn't apologize, and he didn't snap away like a part of him wanted to, but he dis take his hand back and tuck it into one of his pockets. Tim took half a moment to look at Jason now that he was awake and confirm, yeah, he's a little feverish. Not uncommon as seasons progressed and the weather started turning to the colder, but also not entirely safe. A bad cold could easily escalate, after all. Another thing to keep an eye on.

But too much more silence and Jason was liable to kick Tim out on grounds of being a weirdo breaking into people's homes in the middle of the night. So. "Hey kid. I was hoping you might know somewhere on the east side I could get a fire hydrant wrench. Preferably not just a fire hall, but if that's all we've got then I'll make do."

Jason stared at him, like he was trying to decide if maybe he hadn't woken up after all and this was just a very stupid dream. But, really, he knew better than that. "Obviously a fire hall is your best bet. You could also hit up one of the city utility depots, though that's one hell of a walk from the west side." His brow furrowed. "I think there are a couple of bruisers over there who like to threaten the street kids with some fucked up looking wrenches. Dunno if they're the right kind though."

And this was why Tim had opted to defer to expertise on this one. Sometimes no amount of recon could match lived experience. Where he was going from here, well that was a little more complicated, but at least now he had *options*.

City property always had mediocre as hell security, though Tim would lean slightly towards the utilities depot having both better quality and worse execution, the effects of the city knowing there were some things of moderate value on site competing with labourers' general disinclination to adhere to complicated protocols. The fire hall would, at the very least, have someone actively awake, and if Tim ran into them he was going to have a *very* uncomfortable conversation.

Really, he'd prefer to run into one of these alleged bruisers and relieve them of their misused wrenches, but that was too much of a gamble for his tastes. Especially with his ever dwindling time limit. Better to go with a less than ideal but workable option than hope for things to go his way for once.

Jason had a point, though, about there not being any depots all that close to the west side. Certainly none in walking distance. Tim supposed he *did* have the equipment to go swinging, but even that would be pushing his luck. Really, what he needed was a vehicle he could borrow.

Hm.

Tim started to absently thank Jason and head back for the window,

when he was stopped by a strong grip around his wrist. Jason was up and had apparently been sleeping in his clothes. Had something happened earlier today, or did he know his mother was likely drugged unconscious and had decided to be ready for anything, just in case. Tim wasn't sure which was worse.

"I'm coming with you," Jason said simply. Not giving an inch, though Tim wasn't really trying to pull away.

He raised an eyebrow. "And why would I let you do that? Jason, you're sick. Right now you need to rest, more than anything."

The shoe was on the other foot, but Tim already knew he was going to cave. He had come here looking for an extra hand, and for better or worse he was leaving with one. He'd be careful. Jason would make it home safe.

Jason grinned, a few too many teeth to be entirely friendly. "If you had wanted information you could have guessed, you would have gone to Luke. You came here because you wanted help. So let me help."

Intuitive as ever, Tim couldn't help being a little proud of him.

"Point," Tim conceded, twisting his hand to grab Jason's wrist in return and tug him closer. "This needs to be quick though, and are you sure you're up to it? No shame in being unwell, only in causing problems because you were too stubborn to know your limits."

Hypocrisy, thy name is Tim.

And by now, this Jason knew that too. Which. He wasn't going to think about until after he had that fence's phone number.

"Well do *you* know a motorcycle no one will notice if we take for a quick spin down to a utilities depot?"

And that was another point in his favour. A half-decent bike would make getting from a depot to the west side, and then around to cause chaos as necessary, a breeze. And it has been *so long* since Tim had gotten to ride.

It would also be a dick move to get Jason to show him the bike and ditch him. Even if it was in his best interest.

Dammit.

"Fine, but if anyone so much as looks at us funny you're taking the bike and coming *straight* back here, understood?" Tim gave Jason a pointed look. Actually. "Do you even know *how* to ride a motorcycle?"

Shifty eyes and pointedly not fidgeting fingers. So that was a no, then.

“Alright, do *not* ride the bike without me, try to get somewhere safe and avoid any cops. I’ll come find you if I can, but don’t wait around for me. Clear?”

“Clear,” Jason nodded. “Since apparently we’re in a hurry, so how about you tell me what the hell we’re doing on the way?”

Oh this was assuredly going to go poorly.

Tim grabbed Jason a jacket from the closet and tossed it to him, as Jason took a swig of some kind of juice off the counter. Maybe for the sugar, maybe for a kick of that sweet, sweet vitamin C. That it was already out, he probably had been *trying* to take care oh himself. And to his credit, he caught the jacket easily enough in his free hand.

“A little bit of light B-and-E, a little public disturbance,” Tim hand-waved, deliberately flippant. This wasn’t serious, he wanted to explain, but that probably do more harm than good. “Mostly just looking to cause some problems for the police for a few hours in exchange for some information.”

Jason’s attention sharpened. “Who’s getting hurt?”

Tim was glad he could answer honestly. “Ideally, no one. We’re not going to hurt anyone if we don’t have to, and the other end of this deal would be thrilled if they didn’t see a single other person tonight.”

“So we’re abetting a robbery?” Jason asked, still on edge, but following Tim out the door regardless.

“Abetting is a strong word,” Tim hummed, waiting while Jason locked the door and took the lead down the stairs and out of the building. “We’re just going to be doing some things, and on the other side of the city, someone else is going to be doing some things. And our things are going to be louder.”

It wasn’t a long walk to where someone had apparently taken to stashing their third-hand bike behind several tarps and a couple of cheap locks. Not a great set-up, all things considered, but it was inconspicuous enough, he supposed. And he could easily see how Jason found it, maybe looking for a place to bunker down for a few hours at some point. Something about that image, Jason huddled beneath a tarp beside a rusty motorcycle, bit deep.

There should have been a better option.

But that was half the point, wasn’t it? There ought to be better places for kids who couldn’t be at home to stay warm, better options for transportation, for security, for *people*.

And making things better *cost*.

Tim popped the locks with tools discreetly pulled from his belts and

wheeled the bike out of place. He'd let Jason hotwire it, normally, but the clock in the back of his head was still ticking.

If Tim was lucky, tonight would help him pay for some of what he was hoping to do. More realistically, he was going to keep paying for it for a long time. Not like that was new.

As the weight settling into the seat in front of him reminded him, Tim wasn't alone in this. That wasn't exactly new either, but Tim had missed having tangible reminders of it, even if this was just for the night.

He'd have to make the most of it, then.

Chapter End Notes

Two months isn't that many between chapters, right? Right? Okay, yeah, I know it is, and I *swear* I planned to get this done sooner but every part of it was fighting me. Jason wasn't even supposed to *be* here! But we got here eventually and thats what matters! I'll probably do another round of editing on this, since right now I'm just so glad to have this chapter *written*.

Tim, talking to people and scheming? Yeah, that's how it goes sometimes. Especially in this fic, I swear that's like half of this whole thing. He's just out here, Saying Things. Jason is, at this point, suspiciously on team Crimes For Good Reasons, but he's kind of got his own stuff going on so there's only so close he can afford to examine anyone else's motives. And somehow this fic exists both around Robin Year One and also whenever I feel like, so apologies on anyone who gets annoyed by timeline shenanigans that I noticed on some re-reads of my own.

In other news! I'm doing okay! Last year of uni, with all the associated panicking and such, and the podcast Persists. We're doing a charity stream on Nov 19 that's still in its baby stages of planning, but that ought to be a good time. Most recent episode

was on Blade, so go check that out if you like him (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTXnYlGyNsY).

Thanks to everyone still commenting and kudosing, btw because every single notification fills me with joy and its really nice to know people enjoy my work. I am sending you all the theoretical hugs. Hope you enjoyed, and have a great day <3

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ride was as smooth as could really be expected from a bike that had been sitting under a tarp in Gotham for who knew how long. It stuck shifting between third and fourth gear, and the brakes weren't as sensitive as Tim would like, but the machine ran and right now that's all Tim could ask for.

Jason, at least, seemed to be having a great time. Tim was pretty sure the only reason he wasn't whooping with every turn was the knowledge that they were on their way to commit a crime .Some part of him wanted to cry at dragging Jason further into illegality than he had to be to survive, at taking advantage of a kid's trust in him to pursue his own interests, but he tried his best to shove that voice down. This was to fund the safehouses, and Jason would agree that they were worth some shady choices in the middle of the night. Though he hadn't actually *said* that was why they were doing this, surely Jason could guess. He knew where Tim lived, he had to know Tim wouldn't be doing this for selfish reasons.

Right?

Fuck. He *could* just ask, but to be entirely honest, Tim didn't really want to hear the truth. This was important, and even if Tim didn't really *like* running around to commit crimes for Selina Kyle, it was important to improve the lives of those relying on him. Winter was practically around the corner, and the temperature was going to drop *fast.* Tim didn't get to worry about his own personal preferences when there was tangible work he could do to keep his kids safe.

Knowing how Jason felt about all this, and having to do it anyways, would suck. Tim would ask later, once he had the poor kid wrapped in a blanket and tucked back onto his couch with some soup. Then he could afford to second guess himself. Not now.

Priorities.

To try and make it at least a little bit up to him, Tim narrated what he was doing with the bike as they rode. How much Jason would actually *retain* once his fever broke, but at least he'd appreciate the thought.

Slowing the bike to a stop a block away from where Tim knew the depot to be, right now needed to be on getting in and out as quickly as possible. And also to make sure Jason had a little fun, time and safety allowing.

There wasn't exactly anywhere to out and out chain down the bike, but Tim went with tucking it behind a dumpster for now. They were coming back for it, after all, and hopefully wouldn't be gone too long. One more motivator to be quick. As if he needed another reason to *move*.

Jason trailed behind him, hands swinging slightly. "Are we walking the rest of the way? How are we getting in?"

Right. Baby Jay, with baby understanding of infiltration. Tim was being selfish by bringing him along here. But it was too late to turn back now, so time for a crash course in breaking and entering. "We

don't want anyone who might still be there or anyone nearby to remember hearing a motorcycle come morning, to give us an extra level of deniability. If we're lucky, they're closed up for the night and we'll just need to avoid the cameras and make our way past their locks. I don't have to tell you Gotham's government likes to cut corners, and chemical attacks aren't *quite* frequent enough to warrant roaming security guards, so as long as we're careful we won't have to engage. The plan is to get in, find the wrench, and get out."

"That's not a plan," Jason squinted indignantly. "That's a bunch of stuff to do. I wanna know *how* we're doing this."

Tim grinned at him, and tugged the hood on Jason's jacket over his head. Jason looked back at him, clearly fighting down an answering grin. "Detailed plans are for when you have time to case a target. We're winging this, so staying flexible is going to make all the difference. Follow my lead, and save any non-urgent questions for once we're back out, alright?"

Jason nodded, shaking his hands out anxiously before shoving them in his pockets. Tim would have pressed for a verbal agreement, but they were so very much on the clock it wasn't even funny, so instead he took point and did his best to project enough 'nothing to see here unless you want to get decked' to cover Jason as well. This wasn't Crime Alley, so there wasn't *quite* the same urgency to it, but they still needed to be unobtrusive without getting mugged.

The depot itself was fenced off with coiled barbed wire wrapped around the front and sides, making potentially climbing in an exercise in minding hand placement, and an aggressive sign warned that the fence was electrified, though Tim only gave it a fifty-fifty on being live. Best not to make Jason deal with it either way. Tim eyed Jason, trying to decide if he could throw him over the fence if it came down to it.

Probably, but there would be no promises about a good landing.

So, for now they'd go with the gate. There was an obvious camera aimed right at it, but Tim was pretty sure if he climbed up the fence out of its field of vision he could just angle it at the sky. Though that would give away that something was afoot to anyone watching the feeds. Better to just disrupt. No point hacking that would take too long, but there were certainly benefits to carrying around rare earth magnets. Sure Babs had nearly bitten his head off a couple of times for accidentally standing with that pocket too close to a computer, but there was nothing like them for simple latch locks and subtly screwing with tech.

Tim stopped about a yard out of the camera's range. This next bit was going to be suspicious and ridiculous no matter what, so they'd need to be quick. He handed Jason one of his spare packs of picks from his belts and slipped on a pair of gloves. "When I give you a look, you deal with the lock, okay?"

"Yeah sure," Jason nodded, confused. "But what about the camera?"

Rather than answer, Tim hopped onto the fence, careful to do so in one movement with no grounding contact. Without skin contact Tim couldn't be *sure* whether or not the fence was on, years of being way too close to explosions having left their mark and taken out a couple of pitches from his audible range, but he was pretty sure the faint buzzing he could hear was unusual. Probably live, then. Tim tried not to shake the fence too much as he moved, sidling up underneath the camera before digging for the magnets. He'd ended up putting them in one of his bandoleer pouches to maximize their distance from his important tech, and thankfully he had worn the extra belts out

tonight. Score one for leaving the house semi-prepared.

One hand on the fence, and the other very carefully not making contact with the camera holding the magnet just under its bulky plastic body, Tim hoped that the voltage on this fence wasn't high enough to try and force any arcs. The camera being mostly plastic ought to avoid that, but there was always a chance and Tim wasn't exactly happy taking it. Trying not to move and overexcite any electrons, Tim nodded down at Jason.

Jason seemed to get the signal, thank goodness, stepped into what would have been the camera's line of sight, and got to work. Tim couldn't decide if the fact he left his face in theoretical view was a mistake or a sign of trust.

Both worried him, just a little.

It wasn't long before the gate clicked open and after some slightly aggressive jerks of Tim's head, Jason slipped inside and sidled out of the way.

Tim's turn, then.

He had a couple of options from here, some that would make more sense for him to be able to do than others, but Tim hadn't gotten the chance to really plan this out, the timer in his head was still ticking in the background, and Tim was pretty sure Jason wasn't going to be weird about it, so instead of trying to get to a position where he could

leave the magnet on the camera, Tim just climbed up to the top of the fence, braced his hands as best he could, and pushed off with his feet *hard*.

Following the kick through, up and over his head and into a flip was more a matter of core strength than anything else, but the real tricky part was all in the angles. Tim couldn't risk touching the barbed wire at all, since it could act as a potential ground if whoever designed this stupid security setup had more than a single functioning brain cell, so he had to curve into the flip *way* more than he would normally bother. Unlike Dick, Tim's vertebrae were functional, and tended to protest if he tried to force himself to bend too far backwards.

This would be a lot easier with anything resembling momentum, or an actually stable surface to pivot around, but Tim hadn't spent years training with the last Flying Grayson to be unable to pull off a couple of nearly-impossible tricks.

His hands left contact with the fence last, giving an extra push that rolled through his shoulders, triceps, forearms, and ended in a flick of the wrist to get that little bit of rotation that let him finish the flip so that instead of going headfirst into the ground, Tim was able to grab onto the fence on the other side, right way up.

The movement shook the entire fence, a ripple that lost strength at each fence post, but Tim was too busy regretting not stretching earlier to worry too much about it.

Ow .

He had known he was out of practice, no amount of living room yoga was enough to really keep anyone in shape for vigilante acrobatics, but *ouch* . Cool down stretches were officially added to the end of the night's to-do list.

At least Jason looked impressed, from his slack-jawed stare. Heh. Maybe Dick had a point that being an insufferable showoff was worth it.

Of course, Tim nearly fudged the landing when he dropped off the fence, because that was just par for the course, but at least he didn't *actually* face-plant when his ankle tried to roll out from under him. It was close, close enough that Jason snorted at his aborted flail because *nope* grabbing an electric fence for support was a bad idea, but a couple of staggered steps reminded his ankle that it had to be a functioning joint, and that was that.

Nailed it.

There wasn't actually far to cover from the fence to the building itself, and most of the cameras appeared to be on the fence and looking outward, so it was more a matter of principle that Tim gestured to Jason to follow his lead and then crept up to the building. Getting the kid into the habit of going full sneakytime was probably for the best anyways. Might save Bruce some time down the road, though to be honest Tim didn't really know that much about Jason's training with Bruce. It was one of those things that had been a sore spot in the early days and then again later for completely different reasons. Still, stealthing around places that were technically off-limits was a staple of the job, and the Red Hood could come out of nowhere with the best of them, so he must have learned it at some point.

Tim would just be giving him a little advance on some of that, that's all. The timeline could survive that, surely.

The depot turned out to be an excellent opportunity to give some very quiet lessons, almost completely empty except for the sole guard in the security room who had left the door open and seemed more interested in a book of crosswords than anything that actually pertained to his job. And with no chance of this place having a budget for microphones, they basically had free reign so long as they didn't start trying to juggle anything too heavy.

"When you get down to it," Tim whispered as they crept towards their third storage closet in the hope this one actually had the damn wrench they were looking for. "Being sneaky is convincing people not to see you. Why do you think Batman dresses like that? He's a big guy, but he looks just weird enough that even if people *do* get a glimpse of him, they brush it off because there's no way they just saw that. If you can let people stay comfortably in their assumptions; that no one else knows about this deal, that no threat could ever come from above them, that they're totally alone and *safe*, then they'll do half of the work for you."

No dice, though Tim couldn't resist the urge to pocket a handful of screws from an open pail of them. The city could afford to replace them, and Tim was pretty sure the owner of the local hardware store was starting to think he was some kind of doomsday prepper or a budding villain with how often he was in there to pick up odds and ends for the safe houses. He pretended he didn't see Jason take a screwdriver and a box cutter.

Tim continued as they moved further into the depot. " Of c ourse

paranoia can be handy too; get people too unsettled to stand still or trust themselves and they're easy pickings. But that only works if you're committed to fighting them, they don't have buddies to alert, *and* they don't have anything semi-automatic. Give an idiot enough bullets and they'll hit something eventually."

The next closet swung open with more of a creak than Tim would have liked, but it was probably fine. He really needed to refill his stock of WD40 for greasing hinges while sneaking.

Aha. The tool of the hour . Score one for the home team, which brought the tally somewhere around four for confusing storage strategies to one. Why anyone would keep their tool cabinet in a cupboard in what was clearly a break room, Tim may never know, but at least they'd found the damn thing.

And Jason seemed perfectly content to raid the fridge, so they had that going for them as well.

Tim did his best to dismiss any questions about when the last time Jason had eaten would have been if he was too sick to cook for himself or go out at any point in the last couple of days. Catherine shouldn't have been far enough gone for that to be an issue just yet. Unless Tim hadn't been watching as closely as he thought he'd been.

Future problem. Tonight was all about committing minor crime and securing a trade-off. Everything else would have to wait.

What *couldn't* wait were the footsteps Tim suddenly heard coming down the hall. Crap, had they been made? If so, why wasn't the guard running? Had she already called the cops? That would be one way to get their attention, Tim supposed.

"Jason," Tim hissed, getting the boy's attention from the tupperware full of dubious pasta he was eating. Jason turned to blink at him, mouth full of pesto penne, and yeah, no. Even if *this* Jason Todd had no reason to be claustrophobic yet, Tim couldn't shove him in a closet while he tried to do the big boy work. Which meant this confrontation was going to have to be in the hallway. And Tim would give it even odds that the guard had a taser.

It was a good thing he had just come into possession of a very large wrench, then.

"Stay here and finish that, I'll be right back and then we're heading out." Tim spoke as loudly as he dared, not looking to give up the element of surprise on the off-chance they still had it, even if keeping Jason in the loop was equally important.

Diplomacy was out both in the name of speed and in not letting a rent-a-cop anywhere near one of his kids. Jason wasn't really the picture of a building inspector right now anyways. Give it a couple of years and he'd be undercover with the best of them, but for now he still looked like a somewhat underfed pre-teen in the middle of stealing someone's lunch.

Tim bolted for the door, as quiet as the linoleum would allow, and hefted the wrench.

Still. It wasn't like he could open a door someone was walking towards without them noticing, so. Time to be as surprising as possible.

One boot knocking the door open with a crash for maximum drama, and before that could even register Tim was yelling. "Hello, are you aware of some fundamental flaws in your security system?"

That bought him a second of deer-in-headlights bewilderment and four strides down the hall before the guard's hand strayed too close to the holster at her hip for his comfort. Still too far to hit her even with the added reach from the wrench, unless he threw it, but honestly it had been a while since Tim had gotten the chance to really snark at someone, and he was going to make the most of it.

"If your set-up is still under warranty, you should probably try and get your money back." Another couple of steps and the taser was out. Distance device, not just a straight stun gun, which meant he had about three seconds to dodge before he was rendered incapable of voluntary movement. For a normal criminal, that might have been a problem.

But while Tim was no speedster, three seconds in a fight was still like an eternity.

He could still throw the wrench to make up the extra foot of distance, but not comfortably, and after his stunt with the fence Tim wasn't going to ask his back for any more miracles tonight. Instead, a

baseball slide, just in time to carry him under the darting prongs and right into the hiss of displaced air from the gun's gas canister. Tim wasn't sure if this model had the close-range prongs as well, but he didn't give the guard a chance to use them, smashing into her ankles at pace, catching her as she fell, and twisting to take her to the ground.

Then, a foot on a wrist, keeping the taser out of the way , his body weight on her chest to keep her pinned, and both hands pressing the wrench into her throat. He'd feel bad about the inevitable bruising, but the signs of resistance might save her job. He could hope, anyway.

"I would recommend motion sensors on the entrances and exits, at the very least."

By the time the forty second timer in his head was winding down, Jason had wandered out to join them in the hallway, and Tim was struck with some very uncomfortable deja vu. Apparently he had overestimated how long it would take h im to eat the whole container. Which was a shame, because Tim did *not* need to make Jason watching him choke people into unconsciousness a regular occurrence.

"You done yet, boss?" Jason asked with enough nonchalance to tell Tim something was up. A long look didn't show him much beyond a lack of surprise. Not at the violence, and not at the fact the guard was still alive.

Tim nodded anyways. Something to add to that conversation with Jason later. "Pretty sure she called the cops, so there'll be a minor change of plans, but mostly just in terms of location. As long as we're

not in the East End, we can make this work anywhere."

A head tilt, like Tim had given something away. He fell into step beside Tim as they made for the entrance. "The East End is Catwoman's territory."

Pride was not the appropriate response to being called out on collaboration with a Rogue, but that didn't stop it from filling his chest like a bubble bath. "It sure is."

Pausing at the door was habit, a caution that had saved his life more than once, and ah. Those sirens sounded suspiciously nearby and closing.

"Hey, do you feel up to running?" Tim asked, sizing Jason up. Maybe letting him eat all that pasta was a mistake. He absolutely did *not* want to deal with a puking kid. Jason's gaze was a little more focused, a little sharper, so they had that going for them at least.

Jason grinned, all rough and tumble charm. It was so, *so* close to his Robin smile that it hit Tim like a fistful of marshmallows. "Away from some cops? I'm always up for that, weird guy."

"Alright, here's how we're going to play this."

--

While Tim *technically* could use his own supplies for the distraction flash bangs, where was the fun in that?

Instead of wasting his *own* resources, Tim briefly sprinted around the depot like an idiot, grabbing bits and pieces. The six pack of Pepsi in the kitchen, several bottles of antiseptic from first aid kits scattered around the facility, a shirt that had been abandoned, some weed killer and lighter fluid, athlete's foot fungicide from a locker room, and a whole bunch of screws from that handy pail all gathered on the break room table, putting the cheap plastic to the test.

Then, assembly. Tim emptied out the cans, stuck a bunch of screws in, shook aggressively for fifteen seconds, then filled mostly with antiseptic, topped it off with weed killer and fungicide, shook again but much more cautiously this time, and stuck a wick dipped in lighter fluid in each one, then shoved the cans in every pocket he had and ran for the entrance.

All the while, the sirens wailed closer and closer.

Jason met him at the door once again, and Tim handed him a can and lighter from what had looked like a smoking room immediately. "Give it a shake, light the fuse, and throw it, but only if you're out of options because it'll draw some eyes."

"You're fucking crazy, Al." Jason didn't seem at all displeased with being handed a sketchy mild explosive. If anything, Tim was a little concerned by the gleam in his still feverish eyes. "Cameras, lights, and

fence are down and the controls are damaged enough it's gonna cost them to get everything running again. But you know someone who can figure that out, right? They'd be safer on a good digital system anyways, I'd bet."

Okay, Tim stood corrected, he was *very* concerned by the knowing look Jason was giving him. Here, he was technically a data management guy with some weird hobbies. Jason had no reason to think he knew enough about security to try and strong arm utility services into hiring him to do theirs.

Though Tim would admit that was a pretty good idea. If he wanted a larger flow of income than his IT and occasional crime, a security firm was probably something he could pull off, and would, with enough time to build a reputation, be a great way to get cash flowing out of Gotham's upper classes and right into Crime Alley.

It would also be functionally admitting he didn't expect to ever go home.

In the interest of not having a breakdown in an inconvenient time and place, Tim ignored both his own spiraling thoughts and Jason's pointed comment. "Give me thirty seconds and then get gone. Be careful, and I'll meet you at the bike."

"I've been hiding from pigs longer than I've known you," Jason snorted, hitching a stolen backpack higher up his shoulder. "Just make sure they don't shoot you, okay?"

Tim tipped his head in acknowledgement, checked one last time to make sure Jason was out of view of the doorway.

Show time.

Even from the threshold, Tim could see the flashing lights of the approaching cop cars, and once again Tim had no interest in letting them get close enough to realize Jason was there. Stealth was a fondly remembered but distant friend as Tim booked it for the gate. This place would be a kill box if Tim let the cops get out of their cars first, but no one had ever complimented the GCPD on their efficiency, so by the time Tim was kicking the still unlocked gate out of his way, the cars were only just screeching to a halt.

The officer fast enough to open their door first, was also the lucky winner of flash bang number one.

To err on the safe side and to avoid accidentally maiming anyone with shrapnel, Tim threw it at the door itself, pitching with enough force to swing it back into the officer and then shielding them from the actual danger of the improvised explosive.

Maybe ‘flash bang’ was a *little* underselling these grenades.

Because Tim wasn’t an idiot, he closed his eyes and braced for the noise, shielding his face with the edge of his hood even as ran up and onto the closet car. Then, hopping to the next, dropping another grenade behind the trunk and pulling out his grapple as he went, and

used it as a launch point to swing up onto a nearby rooftop.

Only one cop had actually gotten *out* of their car at this point, all of them apparently more interested in any protection at all from the weak explosives. The brave little police officer who could was taking potshots at the brickwork Tim had ducked behind.

While normally that would be enough to make his escape, Tim wasn't actually interested in losing their attention just yet. So, time to cause some very loud problems.

Tim made his way across the roof, staying low and below the lip of the building. The cops attention didn't seem to shift with him, but poking a head out of cover was a great way to be down a head, so Tim vaulted over the far edge of the building and carefully edged along a windowsill until he could peek his head around the building's corner. From here, he could also see that while Jason was sneaking to the lateral side of the fence, he was still very much in plain view of anyone who bothered to look. And some of the officers in their cars were starting to look antsy. One car had apparently reached an agreement to come out together, as Tim saw their doors crack open at the same time.

Nope.

Once again not looking to *seriously* injure anyone, Tim lobbed his third grenade a good fifteen feet in front of the cops' position, gave an ear-splitting cab whistle that Bruce had taught him, and waved from his position in front of a streetlight. With any luck, that would obscure any features besides *short, hooded,* and *obnoxious*.

Not two seconds after the can burst apart in a little storm of light, sound, and screws, the shots resumed, but Tim had already started swinging across the street and back behind cover.

In that time, Jason had made it to the fence and pulled out what Tim sure hoped were the wire cutters he had told him to grab.

The change in position now put him far enough away that at least one cop had the bright idea of bringing their car *to* him. The wretched thing shrieked across the asphalt, two tires having been thoroughly shredded by that last grenade, but it made a valiant effort at covering the distance and at providing a convenient place for the other cops to try and hide behind.

That could almost be called tactical thinking. Tim would be proud if it wasn't also dumb as hell to put all of them in a small space when they knew he was armed with explosives *and* was more mobile than they were.

Gotham cops, man.

Still, Tim didn't like even the unlikely chance of them shooting him out of the air, too personal a nightmare and too close a call to mess around with, especially with his back still complaining, making dodging bullets that much harder, so Tim tossed his second to last grenade at the boot of the car, looking to take out one of its last two tires.

A bang, as one young-looking cop stuck their head and service weapon over the top of the car and the can shattered ten feet from its target before it could hit the ground.

Huh.

That was a pretty good shot.

So either that officer was dedicated and actually *wanted* to improve their community and had just chosen the literal worst way to try and do that, or they had been looking for the chance to shoot someone legally for some time. Maybe they already had.

Tim wasn't going to make it a double.

Unfortunately, that skill made the odds of him getting clipped if he came out of cover that much higher and Jason had asked Tim to not get shot. Somehow Tim doubted Jason would let a graze or two slide.

The promise of competent covering fire emboldened someone enough to come out from behind the car entirely, and unfortunately for Tim, that was actually a disadvantage. He couldn't safely use his last grenade unless he could do something about the velocity of those screws.

Okay, breathe, take a second but no longer. The more he waited to act the more cops were going to get cocky, maybe if he waited long enough and managed not to get shot they'd clear enough space behind the car he could throw his last grenade there and hope this one didn't get taken out like a clay pigeon.

Maybe he could-

An engine growled from the back of the alley, and Tim risked a glance back, because there was no *way* the kid had managed to hot-wire the bike and get it here that quickly, let alone the fact Jason had *admitted* he didn't know how to ride one.

"Hey weirdo!" Jason called, the bike rolling to a less-than controlled stop behind a dumpster. The front wheel knocked into the metal, but Tim wasn't about to hold that against him. "Need a ride?"

God Tim loved this kid.

Tim wasn't about to give this poor bike the full vigilante-drop, so he caught himself on his fingertips wedged into the crumbling mortar a few feet above the ground, getting another twinge between his shoulders for his trouble, and then let himself hit the ground silently.

This wasn't really the place for a lecture, but Tim arched an eyebrow until Jason scooted back from the handlebars so Tim could swing into

place on the bike. He couldn't resist ruffling his hair when he went to tug the kid's hood back into place from where it had fallen. "Hold tight. This is going to be interesting."

Jason laughed into his back, shaking a little but grip sure around Tim's middle.

Tim kicked the bike into a roar and tossed the last of his grenades to the mouth of the alley, using the disruption to take off back the way Jason had come. There was shouting, pounding feet approaching and retreating, and the crack of another gunshot followed by shattering brick.

Jason twitched, a movement so small Tim might not have noticed if they weren't pressed together. He wished he could offer some kind of reassurance, but the wind would drown out anything he could say, so instead he pressed the bike harder against its limits, taking corners hard and fast.

They wove in and out of alleys, evading the sound of sirens and engines and following old patrol routes Tim had permanently etched into his head. The bike's relatively low power gave them the advantage of being much quieter than the ugly panda sedans looking for them.

Closest fire hydrant couldn't be more than eight hundred feet, by fire regulation standard, but Tim wasn't about to drop Jason off anywhere under a thousand feet from those cops. So they drove an extra couple of blocks, and pulled out of an alley right next to a battered red hydrant, minding its own business.

Tim slid off the bike first, leaving it idling, and placed a steadying hand between Jason's shoulders when he followed.

"Care to do the honours?"

Jason nodded, slipping the backpack off and pulling the hydrant wrench free. Tim let him work, turning his gaze up and down the street, watching for any approaching danger.

There were some ladies down the block, working the corner and looking their way suspiciously. Tim gave his jauntiest wave and then pointedly looked down the other side of the street. There were a few people lurking in alleys up and down the road, some more ominously than others, but no one seemed interested in moving any time soon. It would be weirdly quiet closer to the heart of the Alley, but this far into the west side Tim supposed he should have expected it. He used to, would eventually, spend a lot of time patrolling around here and it was usually alright so long as no one had started any gang wars lately.

Clouds were gathering, lightning already splintering some of their edges where the sky couldn't wait to split apart. Tim took a moment to appreciate the nose-burning acidity of Gotham before a rainstorm.

A grunt, a clank, the sounds of metal on metal, twisting, scraping.

And then, rain, on the back of his neck. Pure, and potable, and nothing like Gotham's native precipitation.

Tim turned, and Jason was there, sleeves soaked, hands dripping wet, and grinning like a loon. The lid from the hydrant lay abandoned on the sidewalk and water gushed onto the street in torrents, the spray of which had managed to catch Tim by surprise.

Thunder crashed and sirens sang in the distance. The bike purred beside them, and in an alley across the way, someone dared to peer out.

“On to the next one, yeah?” Jason slid the wrench back into his bag and swung it up over his shoulders. He bounced slightly on his toes, knocking his hood loose once again.

Tim nodded and climbed back on the bike. He didn’t give a damn if Catwoman considered this a decent distraction. The look on Jason’s face made this whole night worth it. “Onward and upward, chipmunk. Let’s roll.”

Chapter End Notes

DISCLAIMER: I know 0.2 things about chemistry!!! It should go without saying but DO NOT attempt to make Tim's stupid grenade here. I went with an unstable option because it was easier for my purposes and I also pretended chemicals I didn't need in products didn't exist!!! I got all the way to the section where he used them before I realized that these were definitely shrapnel grenades and NOT flash bangs so I clearly do not know what I'm talking about!!!!!!! Please take a course in pyrotechnics if you want to know about how to actually blow stuff up.

Now that I can say I've done my due dilligence; Good definitely-still-evening! And by that I mean, it is now tomorrow but I have finished this chapter at long last and it! Took! Ages!! How long can it take to steal a wrench, I ask! The answer is apparently a

while!!! This is nearly 6000 words!!! What the heck!!!

At least I managed to get some of the things I wanted to done in this chapter, even if it turned into way more bonding than I initially anticipated. I also wrote it in like. Three to four parts? So if the language suddenly resets at random points that's why and I will probably (maybe) fix that with editing later but right now I just want to get this Up.

Things are good! Finished tech week for a show I designed the lights for and its going up which is cool!! And finals are approach and I really need to at least pretend to work on my final essays. But in general! We're living and that's what counts!!

Thanks for reading this whole long thing. I don't think I'm going to let chapters keep being this long, but we'll see. I didn't think this one would break 4k and here we are. I hope you have a great December, and that someone gives you a well-deserved hug or other form of affectionate affirmation today!! <3

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next three hydrants were a whirlwind of water, laughter, and narrowly evaded police officers.

It wouldn't have been that difficult to hit completely random locations and keep the cops entirely on the back foot, but a good distraction had to be *just* trackable enough to hold attention while the real show went down elsewhere. So instead of disappearing and reappearing to wreak havoc, Tim let the occasional cop see a flash of their bike and took them in a nice clean arc; not too linear but predictable enough once they caught on.

By the forth hydrant, they had things down to a science, though Tim was keenly aware that Jason was starting to flag a little. They'd hit one or two more and then head back so Tim could get him wrapped back up on his couch and see if he could hit up Maggie for some well-earned cookies in the morning. Jason certainly deserved them and it'd be nice to check in with the girls.

Idly, Tim wondered if it would be worth doing this again during the day with some of the chipmunks so they and any other kids around could appreciate the water. If they could find some tarps they could even set up some incredibly dubious slip-and-slides, which ought to be funny.

Tired or not, Jason seemed to think this whole evening was the bee's knees; hop-skipping off the bike and casually swinging the wrench like their next target owed him money. Tim wasn't even going to pretend

that wasn't adorable.

What a little menace.

Still, it wouldn't do to get complacent. This was illegal, after all, and comfortable criminals very quickly became concussed criminals. Let alone that the Gotham legal system was unpleasant enough for people who legally existed, which, without any of his fake paperwork on him, Tim mostly didn't. With that in mind, Tim took another hard look up and down the street, letting his gaze flick up to the rooftops more out of habit than anything else. It wasn't like Batman wasn't almost definitely indisposed across town with-

Oh shit.

A flash of yellow across the way, darting between rooftops, and Tim abruptly realized his mistake.

If Batman was chasing Catwoman, especially during these early days when their will-they-won't-they was particularly full of public indecency, he'd send Robin either home or on a milk run to keep him occupied, and what could be easier than a couple of hooligans messing around on the other side of the city and running from cops?

They needed to get going. Yesterday, preferably. Tim could take Robin, more likely than not, but he had no interest in a fighting a kid if he didn't have to, and he still felt kind of bad for fucking up his nose back in the coffee shop.

And even if Tim *did* have an interest in acts of violence against minors, Robin knew his face and Tim wouldn't bet a cheeto that Batman hadn't already found his apartment. Maybe Robin would keep who exactly had been fucking around with fire hydrants to himself, but based on his hostility in their last encounter Tim doubted it, and he *really* didn't need Batman showing up at his home or tipping off the cops or something.

Speaking of, Tim could hear sirens once again approaching, and Jason ought to be nearly done with the lid, so they should get moving sooner rather than later. Outright running, however, would probably just encourage Dick to chase them down, which nobody needed.

Time to see if Tim could cut it as a tightrope walker.

Tim tugged his hood once, adjusting to make sure the angle of shadow across his face obscured his features thoroughly, and then picked out that bright shape half-hidden behind an exhaust vent and gave a lazy wave.

The clang behind him was promising. Worst case scenario if this didn't work, they could try their luck with running, though Tim wasn't looking forward to what would probably involve carrying Jason at least some of the way.

Robin was hesitating, which at least meant he had still learned something from the Two Face incident, so at least Tim's interference hadn't fucked that up on a personal level. It was still kind of annoying

though, since the longer Robin stayed perched the less time Tim would have to convince him to let them go.

Once upon a time, Tim hadn't been able to look at Robin with anything but awe, all wide eyes and hope, even when the cape went from Dick to Jason. But after wearing it himself, whittling himself into shape until it fit like a second skin, giving it up, hearing of Steph's flights mostly after the fact, taking it back just to lose it again, and watching another kid turn it into something else entirely, Tim felt he was more than qualified to judge a Robin.

Tracking up and down Dick's Robin, Tim categorized the different blends of kevlar and mesh, noting weak points and judging the fit and range of motion. Idly, Tim tried to guess at the contents of his belt, and where the staples probably were. Smoke bombs on the back, less discrete throwing objects closer to the front, gas mask on the left side maybe? It might still be early enough that Dick was finding his ideal loadout. The weather was getting colder, but apparently it wasn't chilly enough for Dick to break out the winter leggings just yet. Dick's gloves were more delicate than Tim's old gauntlets as well, less likely to contain extra tricks or toys and more just to keep his fingerprints to himself. Even still, there was a surety to his gait, in the placement of his feet, that Tim had never quite been able to replicate. More caution in the slightest twitch of his head, checking corners probably, but the same air-splitting confidence that whatever he was walking into was something he could handle.

Tim wondered how much of it was an act.

"You know, usually criminals start running when they see me, not try to wave me down," Robin said, casual as could be despite the tension strung across his shoulders and the very obvious hands on his belt. Both on fairly frontal pockets, fingers not-quite playing with the magnetic clasps, Tim noted.

Tim tilted his head, sharper than he normally might to let the gesture read through the hood. “We’re just having a little fun on a nice evening. Easy enough fixes, no one is getting hurt.” A laugh, a little more dismissive than he had intended. “No need for anyone to pick a fight, certainly.”

Rubber scuffing on concrete behind him. Jason. Trying to edge closer to the bike, or just uncomfortable? Maybe he was just getting kind of tired. Might be some combination of the three.

“The problem,” Robin drawled, hip cocking and knees bending ever so slightly. A threat. “Is the mess you’re making and the trouble you’re causing for our boys in blue. Do your parents know what you’re out here doing?”

While a classic, and probably what Tim deserved for being kind of a dick, the parents card was always painfully condescending on the receiving end and it was downright ridiculous coming from a kid several years his junior. He could at least try to accuse Tim of corrupting the youth or something.

“Do yours?” Jason piped up, still mostly behind Tim. So probably not all that tired, or very determined to hide it.

At the sound of his voice, Robin tried to peer around Tim to get a look at who was speaking and *nope*. There were already way too many risks involved in letting Jason meet Robin like this, Tim was absolutely *not* going to let Dick get anything close to a good enough look to identify

Jason later. It could only make their early tenuous relationship even worse, if Robin blatantly siding with cops in the face of mostly harmless fun hadn't done that already.

Tim cut in before Robin could say anything. "I think we can all agree that none of us would be here without a little questionable parenting."

Both boys immediately bristled, indignation overlapping at admittedly comedic pitches.

"Speak for yourself, jerkwad."

"Mind your fucking business!"

Alright, so maybe bringing up dead and absent parents *wasn't* the bonding move Tim had hoped it would be. Dick, presumably, taking it as a dig at the Graysons rather than Tim's intended target of Bruce, and Jason obviously very defensive of Catherine's situation even if he'd be the first person to throw Willas under any bus that happened to be passing by.

Tim backpedalled. "Clearly I underestimated the deeply personal nature of our bad choices here tonight. How about we all calm down, grab some donuts, and we can wax poetic about what shining paragons of socially acceptable behaviour your parents were?"

The offer was a lie. There was no way either kid was going to take him up on it, but there was something about offering illicit sugary treats that tended to at least make most kids thing twice.

Of course, Robin wasn't most kids.

"Sorry, I can't be bribed. Maybe you'll have better luck with the cops, since they'll be here in- oh," Robin tapped his chin in feigned thought and Tim knew they had been out of time minutes ago. The sirens that had been chasing them all night echoed off the shabby brickwork. "Fifteen seconds, if you're lucky. Better figure out that donut pitch."

Fucking Robins.

Tim pointedly did *not* curse, could be setting a bad example even if neither Dick nor Jason were likely to care whatsoever, burning with embarrassment about getting caught in a basic stalling technique. He really ought to know better and there was no excuse other than it being *Robin* and he had let himself forget, for just a little while, that that didn't mean ally.

A cop car rounded the corner, lurching dangerously at a good twenty over the speed limit.

Damn his sentimentality.

In the nicest way, Jason was about to be a massive liability. They could probably avoid the cops if they got moving now, but Robin was going to be a problem to shake now that he'd caught up to them. Unless, of course, he got distracted.

Tim reached blindly behind him, hoping Jason would read the request in the gesture. Sure enough, because Jason was a tiny genius, cold metal met his palm and Tim swung in a full body forward motion.

He was not, in fact, close enough to actually make any kind of contact, but a heavy wrench moving with that kind of intent and that close was still enough to trigger a reflexive flinch that Dick smoothly transitioned into a back flip. One of those under-armoured gauntlets slipped into a belt pocket as he moved, and in the interest of not getting any kind of throwing object to the face Tim hopped backwards.

He had the advantage at mid-range, the wrench would make sure of that, might even have an edge in close quarters, what with his familiarity with Dick's style and his own years of experience, but without anything of his own to throw, distance was Dick's friend.

But distance was also how Tim was going to be able to disengage and get out of here.

Like with the grenades earlier, Tim *could* use his own resources for this, but there was no way he'd be able to recover anything before either the cops or the Bats got to it, which would end up being all kinds of incriminating. So he'd work with what was on hand instead.

Of course, what was on hand in Gotham was mostly trash, but that's how it went sometimes.

Tim had always been more of a tennis guy than baseball or golf, but he knew a thing or two about batting. A good swing batted the first two birdarangs into the gutter and wasn't that an idea?

A sweep into the muck and litter crusted against the pavement and crumpled tin, half-melted receipts, and unspeakable fluids sprayed up and across the distance, painting the red-breasted Robin tunic. Thank whatever powers in the universe that might give a damn that Tim didn't have to answer to Alfred right now, because the man was going to be *livid* about how much stain remover he was going to have to use tomorrow.

Yeah that was fucking gross.

But gross did exactly what it was supposed to, and Robin outright recoiled, hands still half up to deflect the worst of the solid matter.

Across the street, the first cop car pulled to a stop.

In the twelve seconds the exchange had taken, Tim mostly lost track of Jason beyond than the vague sense of *behind him,* so Tim was more than a little surprised when the cap off the hydrant went flying past. It didn't make it very far, solid cast iron and thrown by a kid besides,

but it rang against the concrete, startling everyone from the officer stepping out of his vehicle to the young woman who had ducked into an alley at the first sign of trouble. Tim wasn't exactly thrilled with Jason drawing attention to himself, but a distraction was a distraction.

The bike was still idling where they left it, so before the sound had stopped bouncing up and down the street Tim had grabbed Jason by the back of his jacket, shoved the wrench back into his hands, and plopped him on the bike before sliding in behind him and kicking into gear.

Robin was already leaping after them, but where he was fueled with all the rage and confusion in a teenager's heart, Tim was fueled by the desire to get Jason back to bed and that wasn't nothing.

There were, admittedly, hasty blockades at both ends of the street that weren't nothing either, but one thing at a time.

"Keep your head down," Tim said to the approximation of Jason's ear through the hood, trying to put enough distance between them and the Boy Wonder that he wouldn't do something ridiculous and try to make this poor bike carry a third person. "When I say so, I need you to hold the wrench out to the side, mouth forward, as steady as you can, okay?"

Jason's words were lost to the wind, but it sounded sort of like agreement so Tim was going to roll with it.

He just hoped the bike could pull this stunt off.

Charging a blockade wasn't new, but there was always something exhilarating about watching the enemy realize that no, the motorcycle hurtling towards them at forty miles an hour wasn't going to stop despite all common sense and every physical law making it very clear who was coming out on top of this collision. Eyes went wide, some reaching for a weapon, others looking for cover, because even if they knew the idiots on the bike would die, no one wanted to be the one casualty on the defending team.

Didn't move the cars, but that wasn't the point.

What *was* the point was the way Robin followed. Smart little bird that he was, Robin took to the air, swinging off a lamp post to cover half the distance their head start had given them.

Tim swerved off the street and onto the sidewalk, aiming as if to take advantage of the gap between the last cop car and the building. That would have been a perfectly decent plan on its own, but Tim was a bit of an overachiever when it came to these things.

They closed the gap.

A particularly enterprising young cop shouted, pointing his service weapon only sort of in their direction. "Halt!"

As if.

“Now!” He called over the rushing air, as loud as he dared. If Jason didn’t hear him then this was about to get very unpleasant.

Jason, beautiful, brilliant, sharp *gift* that he was, stuck out the wrench, braced against his body.

First target, the newspaper box. The jump up onto the curb nearly threw off the aim, but a sharp tug at the handle bars had the wrench crashing into it at just the right angle to sent it careening into the trunk of the nearest car in the barrier, making a fairly obvious if incredibly dubious ramp. If there was anyone who had managed to sleep through the sirens and the shouting, they were definitely awake now.

Just another reason to make sure he didn’t get caught, because Gothamites could and would hold a grudge over lost sleep.

In a true show of stubbornness worthy of Batman at his dumbest, the wrench was still outstretched. Jason had partially curved himself over it, bracing himself against the handlebars

Out of the corner of his eye, Tim caught a flash of red and gold moving to intercept their path to the barrier, maybe trying to save them from what must seem like a suicidally destructive move.

Which led to target two and possibly the bike telling Tim to go fuck himself; a parking meter.

Tim couldn't brake without giving away the game and giving Robin time to adjust, so he released the throttle, letting their momentum carrying them at a neck-snapping pace. This was stupid enough without asking the motorcycle's old tires to both propel them *and* turn.

As they passed the meter, only a few yards from steel and unpredictable but assuredly high amounts of injury, Tim swerved, missing the meter by inches, and then snapped the handlebars the opposite direction in a turn so tight there was no way this bike could handle it unassisted.

Which was what the wrench was for.

The mouth caught around the meter's pole, giving them a nice pivot point to wrap their speed into a nice loop instead of a vaguely leftward skid.

Less than halfway into the turn, the wrench shook. A little unsteady.

Fuck.

Tim released the handlebars with his outer hand and wrapped it around one of Jason's, pulling out as if to detach the wrench without releasing its hold on the parking meter. Jason's hands and shoulders were shaking. There wasn't much Tim could do but guide them out of the turn as fast as he could without the bike falling apart.

Holding the bike steady with one hand and a terrified kid with the other wasn't fun. The competing tensions pulled across Tim's back and his shoulders burned, but they had come too far to fail because Tim overestimated a child's upper body strength. And like any mistake, it was his responsibility to fix it.

With a worrying rattle from the bike's frame, they finished the one-eighty. A birdarang clattered into the pavement ahead of them, where there back tire would have been if they'd gone straight, and a bright Boy Wonder landed after it. Looked like he'd been planning to immobilize the bike and then drag them off before they could hit anything. Tim had to give him credit, it was a decent plan and under most circumstances it would have worked. No way Robin could have known he wasn't up against a couple of common hooligans.

Well. The jury was still out on Jason's hooligan status. The steadfast way he kept the wrench out, even now, pointed to yes, but the way he pressed back into Tim's chest said no. His fingers must be getting stiff, and he was wound tight enough to snap at any moment. Tim needed to get him home.

"It's going to be okay," Tim said softly, ignoring the way the words made something familiar ache. "Nearly through it."

That was, admittedly, mostly a lie. They were still very much in the thick of things but that wasn't what Jason needed to hear so Tim kept it to himself. No point stressing him out even more than he already was.

There were a number of advantages to such a risky move. It bought them back some time and distance, grounded Robin once again as his instincts to protect everyone took him out of his element, and their seemingly clear direction meant a couple of officers at the far end of the street had gotten back into their cars to try and shrink the playing field.

Instead, they'd compromised their blockade.

Perfect.

Sort of.

In, out, and around they wove cars, cops, and lampposts, until the squealing rubber was almost soothing.

If they made it out of this, Tim was going to owe whoever owned this motorcycle gas money and new tires. Also a drink. Possibly his first born child.

The remaining cars at the end of the road weren't much in the way of

deterrents. Sure it took a little manoeuvring to get the bike through, but stupid stunts on wheels had been Tim's bread and butter as Robin and it was all he could do not to laugh at the frustrated shouts as he and Jason slipped away. A faint sound of a grapple firing warned him not to get too comfy, but two turns and they were on a street wide enough to make swinging inconvenient. Wouldn't throw him off entirely, but it would extend their lead.

In most cases having Dick Grayson on their tail would mean the chase was already over. No one flew like he did, and there wasn't a street in Gotham he didn't know. But this Dick was six inches shorter than he would be, with half the muscle mass, and was still learning the nooks and crannies. And on the other hand, Tim had learned just about every bolthole south of the river during No Man's Land, from ones big enough to hide a batmobile to the ones he had to curl up to fit in. Hiding himself, a kid, and a motorbike from one half of the Dynamic Duo wasn't the impossible task it ought to be.

Tim hoped Dick didn't get in trouble for losing them.

As it was, dipping in and out of alleys, taking a shortcut through a hollowed out storefront and out the back, and cutting the engine to roll them in silence under an overpass was all but child's play. Then it was just a matter of waiting. They'd need to get out of the area quickly, but the disappearing act would force Robin to be methodical and coming out of hiding would make his job far too easy.

In the mean time, Tim flipped the kickstand down and guided Jason off the bike. He was so tense, and letting him stiffen up would only make any muscle pain from cold his worse.

“Walk with me?” Tim offered, not staring at the way Jason listed slightly, but staying close enough to catch him if he stumbled. Just in case.

Jason’s brow furrowed. “We can’t just leave the bike. It was supposed to be borrowing not *stealing*.”

Tim’s jaw didn’t drop, and he didn’t laugh, but he kind of wanted to do both. Of *course* Jason was still worried about returning the bike, even exhausted and sick. He’d be lucky if he ever escaped the blanket burrito Tim was going to put him in. “We’re not leaving it. But my legs are starting to cramp and I’d like to stretch them a little before we head back to your place.”

He also wanted to give Jason the chance to ask some questions before he felt safe enough to pass out. This was a decent place for it; quiet, out of the way, and nothing familiar to risk tainting.

Above them thunder echoed, rattling his bones, though Tim hadn’t seen the lightning. The storm had to be closer than he thought. His thought flicked to the girls, to Luke, to every kid that had passed through his door since he had landed in the past. Hopefully they were bunking down somewhere safe, somewhere that would stay dry. He’d try and check in with them later.

For now, all he could do was look after the kid in front of him.

Only a couple of feet from the bike, Jason spoke up. “Why are we

helping Catwoman?"

We. The word glowed like the filament of a cracked bulb. Tim owed him honesty. He owed him more than that, but for now honesty was what he could give.

"I made a deal with her. Needed to get in contact with a high quality fence to sell what I picked up from the Iceberg Lounge to get cash for the safe house project." Admittedly, that left out the medications, but after his misstep with blaming Catherine earlier, and his own suspicions about her state, it was probably a bad idea to go throwing around anything to do with drugs, even medical ones. "She agreed to give me a phone number if I kept the cops busy for the evening. Once I get you home, I'll be going to pick that up."

Jason's first reaction was shock, a widening of the eyes that quickly turned flinty, scrutinizing, looking for a lie. For once, Tim had nothing to hide. "And if she screws you and doesn't give you a number?"

"Then I'll figure something out," Tim shrugged. It was a fair question. "There are plenty of thieves in the city, and if I do enough digging and am willing to sell below market price I'll find someone."

"If the Penguin finds out it was you that robbed him he'll kill you." Jason's face was blank, his tone hollow and matter of fact, but his fists were clenched and there was a fine tremor he hadn't managed to shake off.

Tim itched to hug him, but he smiled as reassuringly as he could, a little too thin but it had been a long night, and stayed where he was. “No, he’ll hire someone else to *try* to kill me. I’ll be fine Jace, I promise.”

“You can’t promise that!” Jason snapped, voice thick and loud enough to startle a rat out from where it had been chewing on a styrofoam cup. Possibly loud enough to alert other local and more judicially inclined wildlife. He turned away, the dim streetlights only catching the edge of his baby-soft jaw while the rest of his face fell into the shadow of his hood. “No one can promise anything about safety, so why do you keep *trying*?”

Oh Jason.

“Because I want to keep them. Maybe it isn’t possible to keep every promise, maybe stuff happens and people get hurt, but I *want* to protect myself the same way I *want* to give you and the rest of the chipmunks options for when you need somewhere safe, the same way I *wanted* to make things better for the Vecellios.” Admitting weakness, fallibility, wasn’t normally in the cards. Just putting on a cape meant taking responsibility, accepting that perfection was the only option even when, *especially* when, it was impossible. But Tim wasn’t wearing a cape, or a mask, or even a disguise. And he didn’t want to lie to Jason. “Life happens, and we can’t always stop it. But the second we accept that is the second we stop trying to do and be better and I never want to do that. So I promise to be okay. And I promise to keep you safe. And I promise that if you ever need anything, you can come to me and I’ll help. Because I already want to do all that.”

A sniffle, quiet like he was trying to hide it despite the quiet of the night, and Tim was done for. Two strides and he tugged Jason into him, holding him close but carefully. If he wanted to pull away, he could.

Jason sobbed, just the once, and buried his face in the front of Tim's jacket, arms coming up around him. He was still shaking, still a little too warm to be entirely healthy, but his grip was sure and Tim half-wondered if he'd manage to tear the material with how tightly his fists had wound it. "If anything happens to you, I'll kill you."

In the back of his head, the little part of him that had never stopped counting down until someone noticed him and came to take him home, Tim wanted to cry. He hadn't promised to stay, he couldn't, not when he still wanted to see his friends and family again, still wanted his own bed and home and *life*, but. He was needed here, at least for now. He was *wanted* here, and hadn't had the chance to screw it up yet.

Tim told himself that wasn't enough, even as he rested his chin on top of Jason's head and watched the rat cautiously return to its chewing.

He might have been lying.

--

They stood like that for a while, long enough that Tim started to wonder if Jason had somehow managed to fall asleep on his feet, but when he adjusted just enough to sling an arm over his shoulder, Jason stepped back easily enough. His eyes were a little damp, glassy from more than just the fever, but he was steadier. Hopefully steady enough to get home.

Wordlessly, Tim guided him back onto the bike and kicked it to life. Words bubbled up in his chest, meaningless platitudes and promises he couldn't keep, but he swallowed them down again and again.

Jason wasn't in a state for much more of a conversation anyways.

The drive back was similarly quiet, sirens still screaming in the distance, but the further they got from the west side, the more they faded into the regular background noise of Gotham. The wind was picking up, and Tim picked up speed in response. Motorcycles in the rain were risky at the best of times, and with a semi-conscious kid and a bike that had probably seen its best days ten years ago, this was not the best of times.

And that wasn't even factoring in lightning.

The first drops hit the pavement, just as Tim was re-chaining the bike where they had found it. He'd have to consider stealing it again to refuel it later. Now wasn't really the time.

Getting up the stairs wasn't as bad as Tim had feared it might be, Jason listing into him a little but walking under his own power for the most part. It was still a relief to get the front door open and see the apartment just as they'd left it. Catherine must still be... otherwise occupied, but at least she hadn't noticed her son's disappearance.

Or maybe she had, and just hadn't cared.

Tim tried not to think about when the last time Jason had eaten food someone had cooked for him was as he took his jacket from him and mostly-gently pushed him towards the couch. He failed.

The kitchen was mostly empty bar a few staples; half a loaf of bread, peanut butter, some cans of soup, a carton of nearly-expired milk, and half a bottle of *Gotham Juice*, which was possibly the least appealing marketing a company could have gone for. With the way Jason was squinting at him lazily, he probably wouldn't be awake long enough to eat anything that would take time to cook. Even still, he threw together a peanut butter sandwich and poured out another glass of juice, setting them on the battered coffee table within arms reach of the couch.

"Thanks," Jason said softly, tugging an old throw over himself and leaning back in a creak of springs.

Tim scoffed fondly. As if he would do anything else. "I'll try and drop by later today to check on you, see if I can get Maggie to make you something.

"Not gonna cook for me yourself?" Jason grinned. "Lazy."

"Looking out for your health," Tim corrected. "You don't need to be poisoned on top of sick. It would be a terrible way to thank you for all your hard work tonight." An exaggeration and they both knew it. But

anything Tim could cook, Maggie could do better, and Jason deserved the best.

Despite his exhaustion, Jason's expression sobered abruptly and Tim straightened his shoulders under the weight. "Anytime. You call, I'll answer and help. I promise."

Tim's mouth went dry. What had he done to deserve that kind of faith?

"I won't let you down," he rasped around the stone lodged in his throat. He didn't deserve this, but now that he had it there wasn't a lot he wouldn't do to keep it.

"'Course you won't," Jason muttered, turning halfway into the worn cushions. "Now get out of here, Al, and go collect on your deal."

If he said anything else, there was a decent chance he was going to cry, so with a last, self-indulgent adjustment of the blanket, Tim left. He locked the door behind him, since this was still Crime Alley and there was no way in hell he was leaving a sick Jason vulnerable like that.

Outside, the rain pelted the sidewalk soaking into the fabric of his hood and the hems of his jeans. With the weather, Tim would bet Selina had headed home herself, so he'd check the rooftop tomorrow, but he couldn't exactly leave the medication with Sam any longer than he already had. The pharmacist was expecting him, after all, and it

would be bad form to miss the first of their agreed meetings. That would just be setting the worst kind of precedents, and with how suspicious she was it could very well be a deal breaker.

To his relief and chagrin, Sam was both awake and watching for him when he approached her building. He hadn't wanted to climb the building again in the rain if he could help it, but he was acutely aware of the hours this venture had taken and how she likely hadn't slept for any of them. He'd tip her with some cookies next time he got pizza.

It took her maybe a minute to get down the stairs and meet him with his totally-not-suspicious cargo. Redbird wasn't that patient and nearly tripped on the last two steps, but just the sight of her filled a buzzing beneath his skin that Tim hadn't even noticed until it was fading. "Don't ask me to do this again on short notice, Weird Guy."

"There were extenuating circumstances," Tim grinned sheepishly, dropping to one knee to scoop Redbird up and zip her in under his hoodie. The act wouldn't earn him any points, but it was the kind of reaction she'd be expecting and that counted for something. "Scout's honour. Won't happen again."

Sure enough, Sam just curled a lip at him, though she even she wasn't immune to Redbird being adorable, reaching out to tap her nose gently. "You owe me at *least* three normal pizzas. If I see a single artichoke any time in the next two weeks, I'm telling my grandma you've been picking up frozen pizzas on the weekends."

"Well when you put it that way." Tim blinked, stretching his neck awkwardly to accommodate Redbird trying to bury her entire face in his chin. "I was planning to have some of the kids around for dinner

on Tuesday, feel free to come by. I'm going to make a casserole or something. No artichokes. Maybe some spinach though. Don't tell Luke, or he won't eat any and Maggie'll be pissed."

That got Sam to crack a grin that she immediately schooled back into a scowl. "Keeping secrets from the chipmunks'll cost extra. Five normal pizzas and you pick me up some ice cream for dinner."

"Deal." Tim slung the dufflebag over his shoulder, trying not to jostle anything too hard or dislodge his dog as he did. "It'll be cookie dough and if you have a problem with that you can take it up with Marianne because that's her favourite."

The rain hadn't let up, and Tim was seriously wishing he had an umbrella, but at least the samples ought to be safe, and Redbird would be dry as long as she didn't fall out of his sweater. The bag was mostly waterproof, the more sensitive ones were in little picnic coolers and carefully packed, and it was only a few blocks to the pharmacy.

Now all he had to do was get there without getting mugged. Piece of cake.

Chapter End Notes

> Ooh boy! I don't really have any words for this beyond the incomprehensible screaming but after two months here it is!!! We got so close to everything I wanted to do for this chapter, but I really had to think about whether I was going to keep going because I managed to once again hit very nearly 6k and decided that I should probably call it there. So the convo with the pharmacist tech (who I do have a name for now!!) has been shunted to next chapter. If you see any editing errors, feel free to

point them out because I've read this so many times my brain is now soup.

I mostly like this one. Not totally perfect, and the escape is a little bit less fun than some of my other action sequences, but I'm gonna blame that on being bad at vehicle sections in video games and thus struggling to do wacky stuff with them. Dick finally got to have some lines that didn't involve Batman! Little Jason once again forcing me to be way softer than I had intended because he deserves good things!!!

In personal news, I'm in my last semester of uni and its going mostly well! I forgot how to write a philosophy paper for a bit but that's since been resolved and we are beating back the seasonal depression with a stick. It also has a stick, so the battle is a bit tense, but we're making it work.

Thanks for your patience, thanks for reading, and I hope you have a great week <3

Edit: It was pointed out to me by a lovely reader that I completely forgot about Redbird, so I have now re-added the Best Girl. Thank you so much silentsum for catching that!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maybe it had been overly optimistic to assume Tim could walk down the street without being assaulted by miscreants.

This was Gotham, after all, and between the totally-not-sketchy bag full of drugs and the dog attempting to climb out the top of his hoodie, Tim was admittedly not at his most intimidating. So it wasn't really surprising when the general sound of the rain pattering against the pavement and the material of his jacket was joined by the sound of rain hitting leather.

The *approaching* sound of rain hitting leather. Ooh boy.

Whoever this was, they were either confident or stupid, making no effort to hide their footsteps behind him. They were moving pretty fast. Probably hoping to snag the bag and sprint away before he had time to react. If a purse-snatcher got one over on Tim, no matter when, where, or how, his older brother *would* know, and he would never let Tim live it down. Ever.

Though Tim would take just about any amount of teasing in exchange for a Dick Grayson hug at this point.

There weren't a lot of great ways to handle the combination of dog and full hands, but hey. Tim was intimately familiar with the

importance of leg day and had gotten decent grades in physics, so it wasn't like he was totally out of luck.

Tim counted out the footsteps that were definitely running, took a bracing breath, tucked his free hand across his chest to stabilize Redbird, and stepped sharply into the path of the would-be bag snatcher, dropping into a crouch and twisting the dufflebag out of the line of fire at the last second.

Predictably, the person barrelled right over him and fell face first into the sidewalk. Tim was pretty sure he had heard the following string of curses verbatim from Jason after an expected drug bust had turned out to be a puppy mill instead, which was kind of interesting. He would have thought the combination of sporks, patricide, and toe fungus couldn't be replicated by accident.

Even more interesting was the sound the man made when Tim's heel came down none-too-gently on the back of his neck, just shy of shoving his face into a puddle. Somewhere between a squeak and a whine, it told Tim everything he needed to know about this guy's scale, which was to say he was so small time he was in danger of slipping out of any self-respecting vigilante's perception and into Speed Force-induced relative time. This guy was either just hoping for some quick cash and had decided robbing a stranger was the best way to get that, or he was low enough on the ladder of whoever was paying him that he wouldn't be able to tell a member of the Ghost Dragons from an Innocent Devil if they were wearing name tags and gang jackets. He was also probably the kind of guy that, between the daze of his crash and the very imminent threat Tim was presenting, would forget things like lateral motion existed.

And Tim was kind of in a hurry here. So, a few dramatics to speed things up.

“Look,” Tim rocked his weight forward slightly, pressing the man’s neck down lower but letting him crane his head to get another couple of inches away from the pooling water. Redbird wriggled, claws catching slightly on the inside of his hoodie. “It’s raining and I have places to be, so either I let you up, and we both go about our day, or you try something, I hurt you, and then *I* go about my day and you have to drag yourself out of this rain. Any preference?”

The man all but sobbed. “I’m sorry man! I didn’t think you’d move like that. I missed my bus and if I’m not in by five thirty they’ll fire me, you’ll never see me again, I swear, just let me up, please!”

Oh.

Oh no.

Realization like ice water spilled down Tim’s spine; this wasn’t some jackass looking to take advantage of the weather, and this wasn’t some bottom-rung goon, this was someone who had been minding his own business and *Tim* was the guy hurting someone for no reason.

Oh fuck Tim was the problem.

Tim jerked backwards, nearly falling on his ass trying to get as much distance between them as possible. Despite all the water, his mouth

was bone-dry. “I- I’m sorry, are you okay? I thought you were someone else, I- Fucked up. Are you okay?”

A beat. Two. The man stayed where he was, water soaking into his clothes and shaking enough to send little ripples across the puddle he was lying in. Tim should go back over, check that he hadn’t seriously hurt him, but if he did, if he *had*- even if he hadn’t, the guy probably wouldn’t take too kindly to Tim after he’d threatened to *drown him in a puddle*.

Before Tim could make a decision, do the right thing and maybe make things worse or leave before he could do any more damage, the man shoved himself to his feet and scrambled away from Tim.

“I don’t know what your fucking problem is, but maybe make sure you’re hitting the right person next time, asshole.” Yeah he deserved that. Tim made no effort to stop him as he turned and ran off, couldn’t really force anything else out past the sand in his throat.

From where she was still tucked against his chest, Redbird whimpered and wriggled.

Right. Tim still had things to do. He’d. He’d deal with this later. Somehow.

--

The rest of the walk was cold. If it wasn't for the snuffling heat held close by his hoodie, Tim was pretty sure he'd have frozen solid. As it was, the sight of the pharmacy looming at the end of the street was a relief. If nothing else, he could pretend to be something other than wet for a few minutes.

Like he'd expected, it was too early for them to actually be open, but the lights were on and Tim could see the technician pacing back and forth just inside the doors. Looked like she'd been waiting like they'd agreed to which was certainly promising.

Hopefully she wouldn't hold all against him of the mopping he was about to make her do.

Doors were locked, of course, but the technician saw his approach and met him there, propping them open. Her gaze was sharp, tracking up and down, catching first on the bag over his shoulder and then again on Redbird's little face. Redbird held her attention longer, because no one was immune to perfection, but it was the bag she came back to. "Is that what you promised?"

"Do you really want to do this out here?" Tim asked, raising a brow and taking a pointed look up and down the street. There was no one there, but it was the spirit of the thing. "Cause we can, but it might put you in an uncomfortable position if anyone notices and starts asking questions."

After one more dragged out moment, the technician finally stepped back and let Tim sidle his way inside, leading him towards the back

and away from the barred windows. He paused to let Redbird out onto the floor, and she shook off what water had managed to creep beneath his jacket, splattering the shelves around them.

Whoops.

Ah, well. It wasn't like he wasn't dripping all over the linoleum himself. They were two of a kind, really.

The tech's silence wasn't too awkward, but it was frosty and Tim needed *something* if this was going to turn into an effective working relationship. "I don't think we were ever properly introduced. I'm Alvin."

That got him a pause and a glare, thrown over her shoulder with all the precision of a hand grenade but Tim was starting to spot the edges to her suspicion. She wasn't as desperate as her diabetic friend Suchi, but she was getting close. She needed something to help, something to work, that she knew she couldn't get for herself. Something must have happened in the last day or so. That was either going to be useful, or make everything a lot harder.

"My name is Vivian, and if you ever call me anything else I'll make you regret it," she said at last, not giving an inch of softness or a degree of warmth. Her coldness could hurt, if Tim let it. He tried not to.

"Nice to meet you, Vivian," Tim started, slinging the bag off his

shoulder and setting it gently on the counter, ignoring the little voice that was screaming about not jostling anything. If too much movement was an issue, that ship had long since sailed. “I’ll be entirely honest that this bag went through a little more tonight than I had intended, but I did take measures to protect the supplies so with any luck there’s at least something to show for everyone’s efforts.”

She hummed noncommittally, not waiting for Tim to open the bag and unzipping it herself. At least at first glance things looked relatively alright, though Tim wasn’t really going to be able to breathe properly until he knew for certain. Vivian carefully opened the packages, shaking out a couple of pills from each, then popped the lids on the coolers and withdrew a few uncracked vials, giving them a quick flick before tucking them away again.

There was a second where Tim was more than half certain she was going to tell him to get out and that he’d wasted her time, but he bit down hard on the words that wanted to spill out and watched her edges, looking for the shadows of movement behind the assessment.

Doubt. More suspicion. And yes, buried and smothered but flickering through none the less; hope.

Hook.

Tim couldn’t force the issue, wouldn’t even if he could, but this was more than promising. As long as these drugs worked, he had her.

“Come back in a week. I’ll take a look at these, and if they’re fine *then* we’ll talk money. We clear?” Now that he’d seen the shape of it, Tim couldn’t help watching the way she didn’t put down the last of the packages and the way that despite her efforts to hold eye contact she kept glancing at the coolers every couple of seconds. She wanted the drugs to work as much as Tim did.

All he had to do now was trust the chemists back at the warehouse, and wait for their hard work to speak for itself. He kind of wished he’d gotten the chance to take a look at the product himself, but it wasn’t like he had a lot of lab equipment of his own to work with. Redbird tried to shove her way between Tim’s legs, forcing him to catch himself on the counter, but that was practically second nature at this point.

Fall, catch, brace.

Forward.

“Absolutely.” Agreement, show the *us* that could be arranged, that they could be on the same page, at least a little. Then, another olive branch scribbled on the back of a paper bag using a spare pen. “This is an email you can reach me at. I check it regularly, and I would really appreciate if you could send me a comprehensive list of medications you’d like to see so I can start on the back end work for that.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Vivian snapped, sliding the bag towards herself without looking at it. “A week from now. No sooner.”

Tim raised his hands and took a step back, willing to take the animosity as long as she didn't throw out the bag. It might not be soon, but she'd contact him. "I'll see you then. Have a good morning."

He let Redbird follow along behind him until they got to the doors, but then it was back to being a burrito for her and back into the pouring rain for Tim.

Joy of joys.

After the relative warmth of the pharmacy, stepping back into the rain was nasty. Not snow-storm-in-a-Robin-suit nasty, but approaching falling-into-the-bay nasty. He was pretty sure he would be drier if he had. Letting Redbird out had gotten her to calm down a little, but she must have walked through his puddles because the pads of her feet were damp and pressing cold patches through his shirt.

It was finally getting to the point where Gothamites were reluctantly waking up, a few beaters trundling their way down the street, occasionally sending waves of icy gutter water up and over the sidewalk. At least Tim was pretty much the only scrub without waterproof outerwear, though that wasn't saving anyone's boots.

Just a few more blocks and then he could have a nice lukewarm shower and then he could sleep for at least a couple of hours. Hopefully Maggie would be willing to throw something together for him to take to Jason in the afternoon. Maybe one of the girls would help him snag an extra cookie for himself if he offered to share. Or maybe he could-

A car pulled up next to him. In the second before the window rolled down, Tim ran through half a dozen reasons someone could be approaching him before seven in the morning, and only a handful of people who would even want to in this kind of weather, and for one sharp bright beat, Tim thought that this might finally be it. That this was his ride home.

And he wasn't entirely wrong.

On the other side of the glass, basking in the rattling heater and stench of cigars, was none other than Matches Malone.

"Need a lift, kid?"

Maybe he was cursed? He didn't think he'd done anything to piss off any of Cassie's divine relatives, certainly nothing that ought to reverberate back in time, but he'd been wrong before. *Something* was certainly out to get him.

On the other hand, it *was* a way out of the rain, and Tim at least had the assurance that it wasn't like Bruce was going to kidnap him or threaten him at gunpoint. Not that *Bruce* ought to know Tim would know that. Was this a trap, where he expected Tim to see through the disguise? That would be weird, Bruce was normally pretty confident in Matches being too weird for people to really see through properly. It was the same logic that lead to Mister Sarcastic. Not one of Tim's best aliases, but he'd done the job, just like Matches tended to.

So if Bruce didn't think Tim would recognize him, did he just think Tim was a little bit stupid? Weird based on their previous interactions, but not out of the realm of possibility given Tim hadn't exactly given him the best showing of his survival instincts.

Still kind of rude, though

He wasn't getting any drier speculating whatever Bruce's weird motivations were here, and Redbird's claws were digging into his ribs, so Tim bit the bullet and tugged open the car door and tried not to cringe too hard at the shriek the hinges made at the motion. Let it never be said that Bruce didn't commit wholly to whatever alias he was using. Even when it would have made everyone's lives a little bit better to throw in an air freshener.

Tim felt zero regret about dripping all over the seat. From some of the stains on the grey fabric, water was probably the nicest fluid it'd ever seen.

Matches grinned across at him, ineffable toothpick perched between teeth that were just a little too white to not be unsettling. That suggested this was something of a rush job, but if he wasn't going to stain his teeth for the disguise, surely Bruce could do *something* about the smell? "Where'm I takin' ya?"

Now that was just insulting. Even if Tim didn't have kids regularly using his apartment as a safe place to go, he wouldn't be in the habit of giving out his address to just anyone who asked. Tim shot Matches as withering a look as he could manage with Redbird still peaking out

of the top of his zipped hoodie.

Unsurprisingly, it didn't work. Matches laughed at him, and Tim had to wonder whether there was glue involved in keeping that toothpick from falling. Still, he didn't press, just waited for Tim to give in.

Against anyone else, Tim would have stayed quiet on principle, but outstubborning Bruce Wayne could be an Olympic sport if it wasn't for the incredibly small number of people even capable of it, and it had been a long night and all this cold water was hell on his overworked muscles. So Tim let him have this one.

Mostly.

"Drop me off at the corner store on 53rd and Moore and I'll be fine from there." Even though the Vecellio's was closer to his apartment, he didn't want to go back there today on the off-chance any of the adults in the family had seen him interacting with Sam suspiciously in the middle of the night, and even more so because if anyone *was* keeping an eye on them or him for some reason he didn't want to single them out as important to him.

Tim didn't know what he'd do if one of his civilians got hurt because of him.

"Sure I can't cut out your time in the rain? 'S no trouble, none at all." Matches' drawl was only obnoxious because Tim knew it was fake but couldn't actually pick out anything that didn't belong there, anything

that gave away the ruse.

Once you knew Matches was an act it ought to be clear as day, but somehow it was still easy to lose sight of the mask behind the man.

“I’m grabbing breakfast actually, but thanks for the offer.” Tim was not in fact thankful for the further invasion if his privacy, but that would be nearly as rude as implying he thought Matches was a moron. So score one for Tim’s manners, if nothing else. And getting something to eat wasn’t actually a bad idea.

“Something cheap and greasy for breakfast, huh? Appreciate your youth while it lasts, ‘cause you won’t be able to do that forever. Not the only thing rugrats can get up to though, eh?” Apparently Bruce had been as busy as Tim this evening; from stalking innocent drug runners at the warehouses, to canoodling with Catwoman, to accosting mild-mannered drowned rats in the early hours. Back home Tim would suggest a collaborative nap after showers and do-not-disturbing their phones. Here, he tried not to draw blood as he bit the inside of his cheek to hold the words back.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tim said, trying very hard not to grind his teeth. That would be a sign of weakness and Bruce might lock the doors if he caught it.

A strong front meant nothing to Matches on a bit, however. “Aw come on, I was young once too. I know what it’s like, gettin’ out there and paintin’ the town red on occasion. No shame in it so long as no one got hurt, yeah? But allota the time ya do that kinda thing to get away from somethin’ else. You running from something, kid? Some*one*?”

Was that... Actual concern? About the person he was basically admitting to knowing had committed at least a couple of crimes tonight? Oh god, was this what it felt like on the other end of one of Batman's really weird You Can Turn Your Life Around speeches?

If there wasn't for Redbird still curled up against him and a one hundred percent chance of it definitely making everything worse, Tim would have jumped out of the car then and there. They weren't going that fast, it would have been fine. But alas, while Tim was happy to tuck-and-roll his way out of trouble, Redbird didn't deserve that kind of stress. So he was stuck. In a car with someone trying to ask about his *well-being*.

He was so, so cursed.

"I'm not running from anything," Tim started, very specifically *not* lying. He was hiding from people, that was completely different. Can't run away from threats that don't know you exist yet. "Some people get up to shenanigans just because they can. Not that I'd know anything about that, since I haven't even done anything. Just got caught in the rain while taking my dog for a walk, is all." Not exactly a bulletproof lie, but it wasn't easily disproved, and that was all Tim needed.

He'd gone much further with less, after all.

Matches, of course, wasn't buying it, one deliberately ill-groomed eyebrow arching. "Keepin' a lot of secrets for someone not runnin'.

And anyone with any sense woulda heard this storm comin' a mile away."

"That's me," a laugh so mechanical it should have come with three accessories and Real High Kicking Action. "No sense at all. Couldn't help myself when I heard the distant thunder. There's nothing like Gotham before a storm. Makes you want to push your luck as far as it'll go, you know?"

And there, *finally*, the corner store at the end of the street. Close enough Tim could almost *taste* the cheap and slightly hazardous taquitos.

The car rolled to a stop, but the doors didn't unlock immediately because that would be too easy.

"Look, kid," Matches said, more serious than Tim had ever seen this persona. From the depths of his oversized coat Matches pulled out an old receipt and a pen, using the edge of the dashboard as a writing surface. "I get that ya feel like you're on your own, but ya don't havta be. If ya never need a hand, or advice, or even just a listenin' ear, ya can gimme a call, okay?"

Somewhere, in the back of Tim's head, where it was safe and no one but an incredibly strong telepath could reach, he was screaming. He was crying and climbing behind one of the servers in the Cave, just by the vents to chase off the chill of rock and water and a long night on the streets. Bruce would be at typing up the evening's reports and case notes, and if Tim was lucky Dick would be running a cool-down routine on the mats. There might be hot chocolate, a blanket, and a job well done.

Tim's mouth filled with the taste of copper as he finally tore through the inside of his cheek.

It didn't even occur to Tim to do anything but take the offered scrap of thermal paper. He wouldn't use it, it wasn't even Bruce's real number, couldn't be. It had to be for a burner phone, probably not even one that he kept charged or anything, something he kept around just on the off chance Matches made contact with a criminal but.

It was more than Tim had had in months.

The thought felt like a betrayal. There were so many people who helped Tim these days, so many people who clearly relied on him and cared about what happened to him, so many people *Tim* cared about here.

But none of them were his dad.

And even though it wasn't true yet, even though everything Tim knew told him this wasn't him either, it was still *Bruce*.

Tim needed to get out of this car before he did something stupid like ask for help.

He was probably imagining the warmth of the paper between his fingers as he slid it into his pocket. He wasn't imagining the cold of the door handle.

"Thanks for the ride." The words were rote because anything else might just tear his heart out. The way Matches watched him, the same too knowing Tim had gotten used to but softened for the character, maybe softened because that was just the way present-past Bruce *was*, nearly did anyways.

"Anytime, kid. Just gimme a call."

Tim fled into the rain.

Chapter End Notes

Good afternoon folks! This one is only a few days late rather than an entire month which I feel pretty good about. You can thank my cultural studies class for that, since its that presentation I've been avoiding working on by writing this chapter instead.

I probably could have added another scene to this one, but I like where things leave off here, even if Tim is incapable of not being angsty the moment Bruce enters a 10 meter radius. It's like an automatic response, apparently. But yeah, there is a like. 15% chance the first scene of the next chapter will actually get pasted to the end of this one upon the mythical Final Copy Edits I sometimes daydream about doing on this fic. Which, really, tells you how far gone I am on this project. At least this chapter wasn't 6k this time :p Also also, I had a lot of fun writing all of this chapter but especially the first scene. It took a bunch of reworking to get it the way I wanted it, but I am generally pleased with the final product there.

I'm doing well, and hope you all are too, finals and thus eventual

graduation are approaching faster than I know what to do about, but who said you had to be ready for life to happen. There's been a lot of sunshine where I am, and its been really nice lately. Made writing about all the rain in this chapter kind of funny. Also shoutout to some of the people in the Capes&Coffee server who's very kind words helped me get this out so quickly

Thank you for taking the time to read this and for your continual support, and I hope you have a great week!!! <3

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It rained for the rest of the week.

By the time the sun finally pickaxed its way through the cloud cover and once again hit the city, Tim was pretty sure every article of clothing he owned had been soaked through at least once. He'd ended up lending Jones the keys to the could-have-been safehouse where he had patched him up, because resistance to the cold or not, the sewers had to be nearly flooded and it couldn't be comfortable sleeping down there right now.

Also, he didn't want to end up with any of the technicians complaining about the smell.

Thankfully, it had given him plenty of opportunity to stretch out his very sore muscles until he felt like something more resembling a human being than some creatively strung together strips of jerky. The run to retrieve the phone number from Selina on the roof had been just enough to stop Tim from going stir-crazy, and also enough to remind Tim of the hubris of man.

At least Tim had finally got a meeting time set to sell all of Penguin's stuff that he wasn't supposed to have. With any luck he wouldn't be *too* busy three days from now.

There had been no word from Vivian, but Tim was determined not to

stress too much about it and had instead spent the rest of the week getting Jones' work computer built and working on the safe houses; finalizing the placement of the grocery request lists, taking advantage of the rain to help plug any more subtle leaks in the older properties, and troubleshoot with the chipmunks who were regularly taking refuge from the weather in his apartment. Word had gotten out that he had towels, a radiator, and a functional kettle and he'd had kids showing up to dry off or warm up periodically. Then even *more* word got out, about the safehouses this time as Luke and the girls were happy to chat to anyone who asked about the blueprints on the kitchen table, and suddenly he had a decent group of kids willing to give them a go if only to wait out the wet. They'd be officially metaphorically opening the doors to the first safehouse, a repurposed bodega that had gone under due to a chain grocery store opening a few blocks over, tomorrow morning assuming all things went well.

Tim was more than a little relieved. An apartment full of children wasn't exactly conducive to keep secrets, unfortunately. So Tim had been forced to move some of his more incriminating scheme-related goods to his warehouse, hiding them up in the rafters where no one but a Bat would ever bother to go. He'd managed not to run into any of Bruce's personas snooping around, thankfully, but the absence had left him more on edge than he'd like to admit.

If anyone asked, not that they would know to, Tim would blame that lingering prick of paranoia for why he needed Maggie to point out the absence at the Tuesday chipmunk dinner.

"Has Jason been around here at all this week?" Her words were almost casual, but there was nothing soft about her raised eyebrow. "He still wasn't well when I dropped off soup the other day, but his mother seemed to be taking care of him. Still, he hasn't stopped by for lunch even once since and I'm beginning to wonder if that blackhole in his stomach has finally eaten him."

Tim searched his memory of the last week as Luke and Marianne peered at him inquisitively. Layla was, predictably, too occupied with trying to balance her peas to listen. Surely with everyone coming by Jason had stopped in at least once, right? But no, now that he actually thought about it Tim couldn't recall seeing Jason at all. He'd asked Maggie to check on him and then he'd... Gotten busy. Dammit.

Okay. He could fix this easily enough. He'd drop by for lunch as soon as he got the kids settled and he'd bring a pint of ice cream to make it up to Jason for not visiting sooner.

"I haven't seen him, but I'll be sure to check in with him. See if he needs anything." A glance at Luke who looked a little mulishly ready to offer help. Which, while tempting, would be a great way to end up with two sick kids instead of one. Admittedly Tim wasn't exactly the best option for minimizing the number of sick people in total but still. Damage control. "Luke, Marianne, can I leave you guys in charge of talking to anyone that shows up at the safehouse after I leave? They'll probably be more interested in your opinions than mine anyways."

Marianne gave him a look, and yeah fair enough. He wasn't exactly being subtle, but that wasn't the point. The point was he was still kind of right, and Marianne was smart enough to get that.

But that didn't mean she was going to play along no questions asked, because that would be too easy and that wasn't how Tim's life worked.

"Only if you take Layla with you and leave Redbird with us. A dog

will make it look way friendlier! Oh and you have to bring pizza on your way back." The offer was genuine enough, but Tim knew that look in her eye. Marianne loved her sister, would do anything to keep her safe, and kids or not Marianne wouldn't want Layla around a bunch of strangers. Not if she wasn't sure she could keep an eye on her.

That she wanted Tim to take care of Layla by himself while she vetted these new people, well. There wasn't much he could say to turn away that trust, even if he could find a way to force a denial past the sudden honey in his throat.

These kids were going to be the death of him.

He was never giving any of them back.

"Fine but Layla and I get to pick the toppings, and if any of you complain I'll eat them all myself," he finally said after taking a beat too long to swallow back the sweet sincerity that would would probably be unwelcome and would certainly be embarrassing if it managed to spill out.

A chorus of groans echoed around the table, Luke shooting Marianne a dirty look and Layla's tower of peas toppling over and sending little green balls scattering across her plate. Maggie has bullied Tim into finally getting a few pieces of actual crockery, even if he saved them for the smaller gatherings. He wasn't doing dishes for half a dozen children several times a week, thanks, but he could manage for these little get-togethers. Being a decent host was important, after all.

Somewhere, somewhen, Alfred would be at least a little proud of him. Hopefully.

"We're going to go see Jay?" Layla asked, eyes wide and fork dangling dangerously over the edge of the table. If it fell Redbird would probably try to steal it, mistaking it for a dropped food, and once she realized that she *couldn't* chew through the nickle-plating, she would hide it under the couch. Again.

"Watch your fork, honey," Tim said gently, using his foot to nudge Redbird farther from Layla's seat under the table. "And yeah, you and I'll go check in on Jason and see if he needs cheering up. Being sick is no fun, and he's probably been stuck inside for a while."

Had Tim made him worse by taking him out that night? He hadn't regretted it in the moment or since, but if that was the reason Jason's cold was so much worse then the very least he could do was make sure he was okay.

Dinner ended smoothly enough from there, though Maggie occasionally gave him considering and indecipherable looks. Was she mad at him for being an irresponsible... caretaker? Neighbour? Person who cares about a few specific children without any real affiliation? Whatever it was, Tim wished she would stop. They were one part assessing, three parts mysterious and all parts worrying.

The kids were, thankfully mostly immune to Tim's nonsense after repeated exposure, so they were engaged primarily with attempting to return asparagus surreptitiously to the serving dish Maggie had

brought over. Tim couldn't blame them, he'd never liked it as a kid either and it was definitely a good sign that the kids were getting comfortable enough to reject food they didn't like, but given it was about the only thing left *in* the dish at this point, it was pretty obvious each time another stalk joined the pile. Maggie certainly noticed, and while Tim was pretty confident she wouldn't *actually* be offended he decided it was best not to risk it, so he began replacing the vegetables onto the kids' plates whenever they were distracted.

Eventually, the last of the asparagus is lost in a definitely-not-planned maneuver in which Luke feigned pocketing a fork and then, when Tim was distracted, Layla dumped the entire dish onto the floor, where Redbird proceeded to chow down almost instantaneously. Tim wasn't sure whether to be proud of their cunning or deeply worried about how much harder that was going to make his life.

He settled on a little of both, and let Maggie take the lead on the ensuing scolding, backing her up with a his best impression of Alfred whenever Tim brought down an armful of mugs after back-to-back cases and exams. Not his *most* withering, but more than enough to make the recipient rethink the events that brought them to this point. It was enough to calm the kids down from the frenzy of scheming they'd hyped themselves into, which was probably for the best since they were all going to need to be up bright and early tomorrow and Tim had been trying to gently nudge them towards healthier sleep schedules when he got the chance. Not a perfect idea by any means, sometimes staying up was the only way to stay *alive* on the streets of Gotham, but it was better for their development in the long term and Tim refused to imagine a world where that wasn't something these kids needed.

Clearly he'd managed it at least to some extent, because the kids were yawning into their mugs of ice cream and even Marianne barely finished hers before shuffling Layla off to the couch where they almost immediately fell asleep in a slump of slightly sticky children. Luke wasn't much better off but he managed to claim the chair to himself

and was curled up with Redbird so he at least wasn't going to be sugary come morning.

Maggie cocked a brow at him, casting a significant glance at the time on his dented microwave and then at the door. Tim just shrugged and shook his head at her. He certainly wasn't going to wake any of the chipmunks up. Layla still got nightmares sometimes, he knew, and she tended not to get back to asleep again once she was up. Marianne would then stay up in solidarity, and the two of them would manage to wake up Luke and while he could and would fall back asleep, it would keep happening and he would be understandably grouchy in the morning.

Better to just let them snooze here and the girls could go over to Maggie's in the morning.

Apparently there might be something to the idea of caregiver telepathy because Maggie didn't even need Tim to suggest anything before she was scooping up her baking dish and heading for the door. Still, Tim clearly needed to work on his reception because it wasn't until she beckoned him over that he realized she wanted him to *follow* her out. He wasn't overly thrilled to leave the kids unattended even for a couple of minutes but *refusing Maggie*.

After a moment of truly soul-wrenching indecision, Tim compromised by perching himself in his doorway where he could keep an eye on the chipmunks and still talk to Maggie without, hopefully, waking anyone up.

"I'm worried about Jason," she started bluntly, which Tim appreciated on principle even if it wasn't exactly groundbreaking information.

“He’s not the only one to get sick around here recently, and plenty of folks aren’t getting better.”

Tim blinked. He knew it was flu season, but he hadn’t noticed anyone getting put seriously down for the count. There hadn’t been anyone missing on his walks around the neighbourhoods or in any of the local shops, as far as he could tell.

Maggie seemed to read his confusion, despite the fact Tim was pretty sure he wasn’t broadcasting it, and scoffed. “Not young folks like you, for all that you lot get your own injuries more often than not. No, its my kind of people and the little ones that are getting it, and I’ve known some of these people for decades. They know how to take care of themselves, or who to call if they can’t, but they’re *not getting better*.”

“Have they gone to a doctor about the problem?” Tim asked automatically, wincing even as he said it. If these were Maggie’s kind of old folks, they probably couldn’t afford much in the way of medication, and that was assuming they could swallow their pride and get down to Leslie’s clinic for however long it took to get seen. Plenty of people saw the other patients’ injuries and decided they could manage, or balked at the wait times and figured they could find a solution on their own faster.

A lot of them died before they managed it, but Gothamites were stubborn like that.

Before Maggie could even begin to rip him a new one for being a thoughtless dickhead, Tim kept going. Damage control and investigation in one. “Okay, yeah fair enough. Do any of them need

anything? I'd be happy to run stuff around to them if I get the time, and if not the chipmunks might be willing."

Might, as if they didn't take on nearly anything Tim asked of them because they were way too good for him. At least on this errand there would be other adults that Maggie considered trustworthy that could keep an eye on them. Hopefully.

And the names wouldn't hurt either, if there really was something weird going on.

There's something to the shake of her head in response, to the slant of her brows at his response, but before Tim could follow the thought through, a snuffling from inside caught his attention and by the time he tore his gaze from Redbird finding a comfy patch on his threadbare rug, whatever it had been was long gone. In its place, was the resolute, sharp-eyed assessment that Tim had come to expect from Maggie. "You let me worry about taking care of people, you go check in with your boy, and see what you can do about whatever's making him sick in the first place."

That... Didn't sound like she thought it was a nasty variation of the flu going around.

It also sounded suspiciously like she thought Tim would be able to fix it, which. If it was in fact something sketchy rather than some bad luck and an unpleasant virus, then yeah maybe, but Tim wasn't comfortable with Maggie so openly acknowledging that she knew he was capable of things a guy like she was supposed to think he was shouldn't be. He couldn't help wonder what else she might know about him.

But that was the paranoia speaking, and right now he had a sick kid to worry about. No extra and irrational anxiety here, thanks. Maggie was safe. Tim was sure of it. The jury was still out on the rest of Gotham, but at least here, Tim could let the sharpest parts of his guard down.

It was nice, and not something he'd always been able to do even in his own home. After all, there were very few security measures that could keep out a truly determined Bat, which rendered the concept of security essentially moot. Here, there was only one hyper-competent vigilante looking to stick their nose in his private life, and he didn't have the carte blanche of a relationship that would make breaking into his house a realistic option. Perks of being a vulnerable stranger instead of a long standing ally.

There weren't many of them, so Tim would take what he could get.

"First thing tomorrow." Tim dipped his head in acknowledgement. If it *was* his kind of problem to solve, he'd sort it out. And if it *wasn't*, well these days he had picked up all kinds of new problems and getting supplies to sick elderly people and children would weave in easily enough.

Either way, Tim had options.

--

The next morning went about as smoothly as attempting to wrangle three kids in various states of awareness into eating breakfast and getting cleaned up. The girls darted in and out of Maggie's to get changed, and Luke ended up snagging some clothes from the plastic bin Tim kept in the corner for that express purpose. He couldn't exactly give a bunch of kids a full wardrobe, but he could at least offer a few options in a take-one-leave-one set up. The only real downside was all the extra laundry he ended up having to do.

Layla woke up with enough energy to make Tim feel approximately a million years old, whereas Marianne was less of a blow to his pride; still bright-eyed but with about half the bouncing and twice the willingness to actually eat the cereal Tim put in front of them. Luke was, admittedly, Tim's favourite in the mornings. Bleary and soft and perfectly cooperative as long as he was allowed to stay wrapped up in a blanket until the last possible moment. Usually that was when they left the house, but today with the girls running around and Redbird's excited scrabbling, blanket-time lasted until Marianne called him 'an adorable slug,' at which point war was declared.

Tim was not thrilled that he was going to have to dig shredded cornflakes out of the grooves of his table later. At least the linoleum was easy to clean.

Once everyone passed inspection and was declared milk-free, they headed out. Luke got the keys to the safehouse that was going to be their first proper field test, and Marianne got the floor plan and a reminder of his phone number so they could use the cheap landline he'd installed to call him if anything went wrong or came up. Redbird was obviously just excited to be going for a walk. Tim and Layla on the other hand headed to Jason's.

The walk over was slower than Tim's anxiety was happy about, giving him time to run over increasingly unlikely possibilities of what could

be wrong with Jason, everything from alien interference to nanobots. It was probably just the flu, but Maggie had stirred up his paranoia and now he was going to have to look into everything he could pull off a test for just to silence that insidious *what if*.

Though how he was going to manage any kind of serious pathology work with his *very* rudimentary lab resources was a future problem.

First things first, the health and safety of his kids.

Layla shared none of Tim's overwhelming concerns, swinging their joined hands only to sprint ahead and twirl around a street sign and than dart back to his side. She chattered nonstop the entire way, first about Redbird and what a good girl she was with very soft ears, then about Maggie's lemon cookie recipe and how she had let the girls add chocolate chips to a few cookies and even though it hadn't been as good as Layla had been hoping they'd still eaten them all and Maggie had *let them* and all they had to do was help her make a bunch of mini quiches to take over to her friends house and and and-

She was a sweetheart and Tim would always be glad he'd been able to help her before the worst could happen, but it was a small miracle that he hadn't sustained any additional hearing loss from spending so much time around her.

Eventually, the walk had to end and even though Layla assuredly had more thoughts to share, a pillar of smoke came into view, and Tim fought down the instinctual panic. Just because there was a fire in the same direction as Jason's home didn't mean anything had happened to him. There were lots of buildings in the area with fire code violations, and sure Jason's was one of them but that wasn't conclusive evidence.

It sure was enough to convince Tim to pick up the pace, scooping Layla into his arms as he started into a light jog.

Parked out front was a firetruck and Tim's heart stopped. Smoke billowed from the windows of the second and third floors, though Tim couldn't see any actual fire. Lights flashed across the crowd milling around the building, which was both a relief and deeply concerning. He couldn't pick Jason out of the crowd, but to be fair a lot of these people were taller than him. The instincts Tim wished Layla didn't need to have kicked in as well and she folded into herself. All that energy, all that light, went quiet. She buried her face in Tim's neck, little hands curling in the collar of his shirt. Reflexively, he tightened his hold on her, bouncing her a little, and called into the crowd.

"Jason!"

A couple of heads turned, but none of them belonged to a dark haired kid so Tim ignored them.

There wasn't actually that many people here, given the size of the building and its potential capacity, though that was probably because they'd entered what for most people would be working hours. So it was mostly whatever residents were either too old to work, on their day off, or looking after kids. No one looked hurt, which was good, but also not really Tim's priority right now.

He took a carefully measured breath. Panic wasn't going to help anyone and Tim didn't want to unsettle Layla any more than she

already was. Didn't release the fist that had taken hold of his lungs, though.

"Jason!"

A couple of mothers shot him sympathetic looks and Tim *did not want that right now*.

He needed to find Jason.

A woman, Catherine some part of his brain registered, stumbled towards him, eyes wide and bloodshot. "You know my boy? Where is he, is he still in there?"

Every second counted when it came to fires, Tim had no time, but this was Jason's *mother*. "I don't know, I came to check on him. I'll find him."

"Who are you, how do you know him?"

The questions didn't matter, not right now, so Tim ignored them and looked around.

There was a firefighter by the building's entrance, keeping an eye an eye on people, and yes they must have seen everyone leave the building. Maybe Jason had left once he evacuated.

"Hey! Have you seen a young boy, about this tall," Tim strode over, holding out a hand just long enough to indicate his mid-chest before tucking it back under Layla. Catherine trailed behind him, lost. "Dark hair, blue eyes. Did he come out with everyone else?"

The firefighter shook their head, dark eyes apologetic but steady. "I'm afraid not, but we still have people inside and if he's in there they'll get him out."

That wasn't good enough. It wasn't that Tim didn't trust them to do their jobs but. But. Jason might be in there, and what if they didn't find him time? If he hadn't woken up they might not know to check his apartment and by the time they found him the smoke might've gotten him and Tim couldn't let Jason die of smoke inhalation *again*.

Catherine seemed to agree, tears on her cheeks and chipped nail polish pressed against her lips to hold back a sob.

This was probably a bad idea. Jason might not even be in there.

But it was the only thing he could do.

Tim dropped to a knee and carefully set Layla down. He took her hands in his and looked her in the eye. “Sweetheart, I need you to stay here a second, okay? Stay with this woman here and I’ll be right back, I promise.”

“Sir-” the firefighter raised their hands , stepping towards them and reaching out. Tim didn’t give them the chance to continue, tucking into a roll under their arm and bolting for the side of the building. Jason’s window was on the right, second floor. Tim could find it with his eyes closed.

The brickwork burned under his fingertips and he could smell the rubber on his shoes heating up, but it didn’t matter. Running into a burning building was, by all metrics, incredibly fucking stupid, but Tim couldn’t help it. Jason might be in there.

He’d be quick.

It was child’s play to launch himself up to the window sill, no smoke seeping out from behind the cardboard which was as good a sign as Tim was going to get. It was warm to the touch but it hadn’t caught fire yet, so he’d have to take his chances.

He didn’t bother to be careful opening the window this time, gripping the top of the window frame and swinging in through the cardboard, twisting into a roll and coming up in a crouch, searching.

Kitchen was empty, a bottle of that same brand of weird juice on the

counter, cap off, pot on the stove but it didn't loo like it was on. No kid.

Tim had only been in here a few seconds and he was already sweating. Smoke rolled across the ceiling and not for the first time Tim was thankful for his height, or lack thereof. By the time the smoke was at his face height the ceiling would have probably collapsed and he'd have bigger issues.

Which, speaking of, Tim didn't like the way the roof was sagging by the apartment door. That might make getting out tricky.

To the left, the living room that wasn't actually separate from the kitchen and the couch was empty, maybe Tim was just an idiot, maybe Jason wasn't here at all, maybe-

On the floor, a bundle of blankets, twitching slightly.

Relief mixed with terror in a miasma so thick Tim just about choked on it.

But twitching meant alive, which meant Tim could still help.

Five steps felt like a million years, but when Tim dropped down and saw Jason's sweaty, dazed face peering out of his cocoon of blankets and blinking up at him, it didn't matter. All that mattered was the

nearest exit.

“Alvin?”

“Hey kiddo,” Tim started, already moving to unwrap the blankets, even as Jason tried to work a hand free. “We’ve really gotta go.”

Jason was worryingly cooperative, leaning into Tim’s hands a little too heavily, but at least it made it easy to scoop him up onto his shoulders. He clearly wasn’t up to much motor control and Tim was strong but he couldn’t climb down the side of a building one handed while carrying a kid in the other. So, the front door.

Which just as he turned towards it, there was a groan and the door was buried by falling timbers and fiery insulation that filled the air with flaming particles and the stench of burning plastic.

Fuck.

It was a matter of seconds before the cheap carpet caught fire, so Tim moved into the kitchen and tried to assess his options. They weren’t great.

The apartment only had one entrance, which was officially a bad idea. The window would work, but they’d likely end up with at least one broke bone between them and Tim would rather not-

A cinder whipped past on a heat current, barely registering beyond *a bad sign,* except it caught on the lip of the bottle of juice, and before Tim could even consider alternate escape strategies, the juice started bubbling and oh *that* was a much much worse sign.

Tim swept Jason off his shoulders and into his chest, the poor kid groaning with the movement, and Tim twisted to put himself between Jason and the juice just in time for a nasty *bang.* Shattered plastic, chunks of plaster, and shards of ceramics struck his back, burning liquid splattering his jacket and the floor. It hissed where it landed in his hair, and juice was *not* supposed to do that.

A glance back revealed half the counter was gone, along with the cabinet and a good portion of the wall between them and the next apartment, and with the edge of the linoleum melting in the face of the fire, Tim didn't hesitate.

Half a breath for an apology he probably couldn't afford with the smoke that thickened with passing every second, and Tim moved Jason back to his shoulders. Normally it would have been easy as breathing, but breathing was getting harder and harder and the heat clung to Tim like a second skin, except this one hated him. Still, he didn't drop the kid. He couldn't. There was still enough counter to make maneuvering awkward and a few beams standing in the wall but Tim didn't waste time trying to edge between them, he just snapped a heel into the centre-most beam, cracking it in half, and ducked through the gap. The splintered edges of the counter tore at his jeans and jacket, but it didn't matter. Against his back, Jason whimpered, a tiny sound of discomfort. That mattered.

But Tim couldn't get him help until they were outside, so he kept

moving.

Thankfully, it seemed that the door to this apartment was far enough over that it was still unobstructed, so Tim sprinted for it, trying not to breath too deeply and choke himself out. A hallway and a flight of stairs, he could make that. He had to.

The soles of his shoes stuck to the floors, still half-melted from the climb, and he was starting to get lightheaded, but he kept his grip on Jason and kept running. Just the stairs to go.

The floor shook and for a second Tim thought it was over, that despite his best efforts he hadn't been fast enough, but then the first of the firefighters emerged from the smoke. They were shouting, Tim was pretty sure, but he couldn't really focus on that right now. If he thought about anything but getting outside he was going to drop Jason and that wasn't allowed, so he didn't bother trying to parse it.

Whatever they'd been trying to say, they reached out towards Jason, and Tim's brain skipped like a warped record. They could help, he knew they could, that was their *job*, but he couldn't pry his fingers open. He-

Couldn't afford to waste time. He couldn't let go of Jason, so it wasn't worth trying. He turned away and kept going, nearly tripping on a peeling corner of carpet.

Time melted, just a little, and the next moment that was really clear

was a paramedic coaxing his hands loose and Tim didn't want to let go, but there was a presence behind him there to catch Jason so he wouldn't fall and that was, that was okay.

Jason wouldn't fall.

Tim creaked his fingers open, each one releasing a shower of ash and soot. A beat and then the weight was lifted off his shoulders and it felt a little like losing a limb. He tried to take a breath and that was when the ache in his chest made itself known, dragging him into a coughing fit and then there were hands on him, peeling off his ruined jacket and guiding him to sit on the edge of... something. A vehicle maybe.

He was handed a mask, and Tim gratefully pressed it to his face. He needed to think, needed to put things together, there'd been something important inside- or was that Jason? He'd gotten Jason out, was that it? Layla was safe with the firefighter and Catherine and Jason was out, so what was he missing? There was something he'd seen, something-

A voice cut through his thoughts, someone crouching in front of him. The paramedic from before. He should ask them if Layla was safe, ask if Jason was okay. It was all he could do to breath, for just a moment.

"Hello sir, my name is Munashe, I'm a paramedic and I'm here to help. If your throat's okay, I have a couple questions about the kid you came out with. Do you know if he's on any medications? He's displaying signs of ethyl chloride poisoning and we think he might be on too high a dose of something." Ethyl... chloride? As far as Tim knew Jason wasn't on anything, though it was possible Catherine had something topical in the house to help soothe injection wounds, but it

was unlikely to be enough to cause a reaction, especially if Jason didn't touch it.

But ethyl chloride *was* flammable. That bottle of juice had exploded with enough force to tear open a wall. And Jason had been *drinking* the stuff.

Maggie had been right, something was going on.

Which meant Tim was going to have to get to the bottom of it.

The paramedic was still waiting for an answer though, so Tim shook his head.

A hum. "Odd. The kid is mostly alright, only a little smoke inhalation probably because he wasn't panting like you were, but other than the poisoning and a few superficial burns and scrapes he's going to be okay. I'd like to take a look at your back since you seemed to get the worst of it, if that's okay."

Oh, right. His back did hurt and he was pretty sure there were a couple of pieces of plastic lodged in the meat of his shoulder and there were scratches across his hips. He should probably get those sorted. Tim turned and sat quietly as they cut open the back of his shirt and got to work, keeping the mask pressed to his face and enjoying the clear air for as long as he could.

From across the street, where they'd been waiting, Catherine and Layla picked their way over. Both looked teary, but Catherine held Layla's hand the whole way and her gaze was clear and sharp. They were okay. Jason was okay. Tim closed his eyes for a two count before acknowledging them.

"Do you have somewhere you can stay?" he croaked, reaching out a hand to take Layla's, swiping his thumb back and forth to try and soothe her shaking. He left a streak of ash across her skin, but it seemed to do the job.

Catherine's mouth thinned. "I do, but I don't want Jason around them. They're a bad influence and I don't trust them with him. You're that Alvin boy he's mentioned, aren't you?"

That was... Frustrating that Catherine would be willing to part with her son like this, but at least it was because she wanted him to be safe. She was trying her best, even if other than the running-into-a-burning-building thing, she had no reason to trust him anymore than these mysterious friends of hers.

Still, Tim knew the right answer to the question she wasn't asking.

He nodded. "If you want, he can crash at my place until you figure something out."

As if Jason hadn't been sleeping there at least once a week anyways.

She sagged in relief, gratitude and a little bit of that early suspicion warring on her face even as Tim took note of the little spasm in her hand. He wondered if she'd gotten her fix for the day. "Thank you. Can you give me the address, so I know where to find him?"

Tim was a little surprised she'd even thought to ask, but it was an easy enough answer even as the words felt like sandpaper in his throat. He doubted she'd actually drop by, but maybe Jason would like it if she did. Probably best not to tell him though, in case she didn't follow through.

Catherine nodded, not writing it down he noticed, and stepped aside towards another vehicle where Tim was fairly sure Jason was being treated. He'd leave her to it. If she wanted to tell Jason the plan, Tim certainly wasn't going to complain. It'd give his poor throat a break.

Speaking of people that needed a break, sweet little Layla cuddled into his side despite the layer of ash covering him and Tim wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Marianne was not going to be pleased to hear about their day, but at least Layla had been safe the whole time.

Tim pressed a kiss to her head, and started to flip through his mental rolodex of current occupants of Gotham's industrial district. It had to be someone at least somewhat legal if they had gotten their products on shelves, but probably fairly recent if the poisoning was only happening in and around Crime Alley.

Was there any new companies ordering large amounts of potentially dangerous chemicals? Tim liked to think he would have noticed, what with his in at the docks and all-

And then he remembered the shipment of weird chemicals he'd commandeered for his lab that had been bought by a soda company. And the weird proto-fear gas in the basement of the locally owned coffee shop. He had assumed they were unrelated, but between them and the explosive juice that was three different locally sourced beverages that were unfit for human consumption, and at least two of those were trackable. Tim would bet all three were owned by the same person, though what exactly they were doing other than hurting people was a great question.

Whatever it was, it had to stop.

Tim needed to get home to start looking for a connection, needed to check on Jason and reassure himself he was okay, needed to talk to Luke and Marianne to be certain they'd had a better day and things had gone down okay on their end. He could do that in a minute.

For right now though, Tim held Layla against his side and breathed.

There had to be a solution to all this.

And Tim was going to find it.

Chapter End Notes

Good evening all! It has been a hot minute since I've posted

anything for this fic, but here we are!! I wasn't sure for ages how to get through this because it was a lot of dialogue, so I chose to throw a fire in the middle of it and I'll admit that really picked up the pace. I got over 2k done in one day after dragging my ass for weeks. This is, of course, kind of long but I've given up on writing anything of a reasonable length for this fic again.

Drama! Fire! Tim being overprotective and ridiculous! A wild Catherine appearance! This chapter has it all, and also basically no editing so if you see something stupid and wrong feel free to tell me. I am well aware, of course, that by all rights I should have a fried Tim because this isn't how building fires work but shhhhhhh its fun. Anything else is fair game. Also, idk how this Catherine reads because she's such a tricky character in my head, but I think I got her alright in the end. Feel free to disagree!

Oh and on the chemical I picked for the poison; I continue to know nothing about chemistry and surprise surprise it was hard to find something both flammable and likely to be in a medication so I made do with what I could. From what I understand its a part of some topical stuff but not something usually ingested. If its completely absurd you have my apologies and I blame Carl whom gave me the idea (<3).

Thanks for reading and for your patience as always, and I hope you all have a lovely day!!! <3

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The paramedics had tried to get Tim to go to a medical facility for monitoring, said between the smoke inhalation, the chemical and heat burns, and the flesh wounds that he should probably get some kind of extended treatment. Even just for a couple of hours, they'd said. Better safe than sorry and all that.

Ha. As if. Tim had shit to do that didn't include being trapped in a hospital, thanks.

Catherine was apparently accompanying Jason to Leslie's for *his* more extended treatment, after which Tim would come pick him up and walk him home for the night. A little voice in the back of his head hissed that he shouldn't let Jason out of his sight again so quickly, but the more practical one pointed out that he'd end up spending most of the night watching over Jason anyways, that he was already behind on this investigation, and who knew what time sensitive evidence he was already missing out on.

Coddling could come later, first there was a job to do.

First stop, however, was checking on Marianne and Luke.

Maybe it was all that smoke inhalation, but even with the threat of some jackass poisoning the local population, Tim couldn't help being a

little buoyant on his way to the safe house. There was just something about seeing it completed, about finally being able to open it up to the kids he'd been thinking about every step of the design process, that filled his chest with an airy warmth. It was a little like announcing the Neon Knights program, except this time Tim had been steering every level of the project the whole time and also he actually got to do it instead of focusing on a scheme. Anything he didn't do had been done by the chipmunks, who cared about this just as much as he did. This was the point, what all his running around and scheming and building had been *for*. To help some kids. To give them a chance and make their lives even just a bit better.

So maybe Tim was a *little* excited about the whole thing. Sue him, he'd earned it.

Walking up to a building that had been in rough shape when he'd gotten his hands on it and seeing it with intact windows, a strong, defensible door, and most importantly two of his chipmunks loitering by the door was a kind of joy Tim hadn't really known was an option. Pride at all their hard work, relief that they were clearly okay and distinctly *not* in any kind of crisis, hope that maybe this was actually *working* blended together in a free-falling spiral until he couldn't tell one warmth from the next, until heat prickled behind his eyes and the only reason he hadn't scooped up Luke and Marianne into a hug was the fact he was already holding Layla.

It was a lot, was what he was saying.

Luke lit up when they came into view, whereas Marianne immediately zeroed in on Tim's singed clothes and the streaks of ash he hadn't bothered trying to brush out of his hair. Layla started squirming, the sight of her sister apparently enough to break through the subdued shroud that had been wrapped around her since the fire.

“What happened to you two?” Marianne spoke first, wrapping an arm around Layla but not moving her gaze from Tim. At least she seemed to notice that Layla was physically fine. The way she clung to Marianne’s sleeve made it clear how emotionally *not* fine she was, but there wasn’t much Tim could actually do about that stab of guilt. He’d made the right choices, he was sure, but it must’ve still been pretty scary. Layla was just so little.

They all were, really.

Once Marianne pointed it out, Luke seemed to catch onto the state of Tim’s... everything, and in the blink of an eye he was wrapped around Tim’s arm. “You smell like smoke, did something catch *fire?* Was it the pizzas?”

“No,” Tim half-laughed, swiping a hand over Luke’s head to cup the back of his neck. The soft skin under his palm helped with the last whisper of anxiety that had been sticking to the underside of his ribs. The kids were safe. “Jason’s apartment building, actually, but everyone got out okay. He’ll be staying with me for the next few weeks while his mom figures something out.”

Luke craned his head so far back Tim was forced to support a not insignificant amount of his weight. A little bit of the joy he’d lost to panic reasserting itself as Tim held on carefully and comfortably. Despite his best efforts, the kid still didn’t weigh that much and his trust was worth so much more than a few muscle aches. Holding him up wasn’t hard. “So we’re gonna have sleepovers every night now? That sounds kinda shady, Weird Guy.”

Although his words were unsubtle and deeply upsetting in their implications, Luke kept hanging off of Tim, and neither Marianne nor Layla seemed at all concerned. Tim was just glad none of the prospective safehouse kids seemed to be close enough to hear. Actually, speaking of-

"As if I can even keep you out at this point. I know you've got a key, though god knows where you got it. But that doesn't mean my apartment is big enough for the whole Alley. Any interest from people here?" Tim was actually pretty sure Luke had taken *his* house key to a lock smith and gotten Maggie to fund getting a copy cut, but he liked the way Luke grinned when he thought he'd gotten one over on him.

Marianne answered, a grin of her own wide and glowing. More than ever, she looked her sister, stress and suspicion melting until all that was left was the same light Layla had been full of that morning. "It's even better than we'd hoped for. There's two kids passed out on the cots right now, one who's taking a record breaking shower, and a guy Jason's age came by and agreed to go pick up some groceries from one of our suppliers. A bunch have dropped by for snacks, and I know at least another couple who are going to crash here tonight. They really like it, Alvin."

Tim reminded himself that breathing was important and that it would be rude to pick Luke up without warning.

It was *working*. Even if no one but these six kids and his chipmunks ever used this place, it would be doing its job and helping people.

God *damn* but Tim hadn't had a rush like this since his first time hitting the streets after the whole Bruce-time-stream debacle; the feeling of being exactly where he needed to be, doing exactly the right thing. Helping. *Winning*.

"'Course they do, you guys helped make it, didn't you? Do you think I could come inside to check in, or would that be a bad idea at this stage?" If anyone in there was one of the rotating kids that had grabbed pizza from his place they might not mind him poking his head in, but he'd never had a kid that wasn't his do anything so vulnerable as *shower* at his place even with the offer open and Tim sure wouldn't like coming out of the bathroom after a shower to find a random adult he didn't know in what was supposed to be a safe space, so. Maybe he should stay outside.

Maybe he should stop standing around like a jackass when one of his kids was still suffering the effects of literal poison.

It didn't look like Layla was letting go of Marianne any time soon, and the kids ought to be safe here for at least a little while as long as they didn't drink any of that fucked up juice. Just to be safe, Tim warned them not to go around drinking anything called Gotham Juice, even if that should have been self-evident. He didn't go into detail, even as he knew that might undermine his point, because it was one thing to say Jason's apartment had burned down, it was another *entirely* to tell them he was sick because someone had *done that* to him. Tim would tell them if he had to, but things weren't quite that dire yet.

They didn't need to know.

Luke's nose crinkled and Tim resisted the urge to boop it. They were

talking business right now, that would be incredibly rude. “Probably a bad idea. They’ve gotta get used to the place on its own before we start throwing your ugly face in front of them. Especially ‘cause you didn’t even bring pizza.”

Brat. Tim refused to smile because he wasn’t about to reward bad behaviour, but he did cave to the itching in his palm and scritched a hand across the kid’s scalp. Ideally, Tim would have the time to go drop by the Vecellios, check in and pick up that pizza, and then he could spend the rest of the day with his kids, but every second he was here whoever had poisoned Jason was out there, doing who knew what.

There’d be time for apology pizza later, for now Tim needed to get to work.

--

That was both straightforward and easier said than done, unfortunately.

Tim started with the dock records, pulling the information again for the shipment he’d stolen and looking for anything from the same company or carrying similar freight. The soda company seemed to have ceased to exist, but there was a good dozen other organizations all receiving weekly orders of large quantities of potentially dangerous chemicals. A handful Tim set aside, manufacturing and construction mostly, which left Tim with various vaguely named companies any of which could be using their product to hurt people.

Back home, Tim could have fact checked each of them from the comfort of his Nest, looking for holes in their websites and financial histories to figure out who was legitimate and who was a front for the villain of the week. He'd have his target in two hours, tops.

Here, however, most of those records were still hard copies in various private and varyingly secure facilities. And sure, Tim could probably break into most if not all of them and check himself, but the amount of *time* that would take would be in the range of *days* rather than hours.

So, alternatives.

The list was long, no two ways about it, and while Tim had the companies organized by the closeness of their orders matching the now defunct soda company's and by the presence of any reactants that were commonly used to produce ethyl chloride, that didn't actually change the number of possible culprits. With a suspect list this long he may as well start interrogating people on the street about whether or not they were poisoning Gotham's youth.

What else could he use to narrow things down?

Well there was the juice company, Gotham Juice, which had to still exist if they were still outputting product and getting it on local shelves. They were probably small time, keeping themselves under the FDA's radar because they sure as shit weren't passing any quality assessments with exploding juice. Staying small also meant that if the company went belly up because it was part of a scheme rather than a

serious business venture, the fallout on the possibly real person on the business license would only be unfortunate rather than potentially life ruining. It might make finding records even trickier though, as the odds of at least a little tax evasion were pretty high, and cash deals were probably the company standard. Tim could look, but the chances of getting the location of a production plant today , even though it had to be in the city, were lower than he was happy about.

It was probably also small because no one out of Gotham was ever going to buy a product with a name like that, but Tim doubted this jackass was too worried about marketing.

Which left him with the coffee shop. Last time he'd gone poking around there he'd been interrupted by the Dynamic Duo, and embarrassingly enough he'd completely forgotten to go through the samples he'd taken that night. Sure a bunch had probably gotten messed up during his confrontation with Jones in the sewers, but anything that had survived that was useless now.

But at least it was a physical place he could go and investigate. Though if he wanted to gather his evidence before nightfall he was going to have to get creative. A straight B&E didn't really work when the place was operational and full of customers.

Unless, of course, there was a reason for everyone to be specifically looking elsewhere.

Apparently, causing problems was Tim's new MO. At least this time there wasn't a whole caper of prep work to do.

All he needed was a gas station watch, some wire and resin, and a little bit of tinkering.

Just like last time he'd been here, the line was out the door, but last time he'd only had suspicions about foul play and *this* time every time he looked at someone exiting the shop with some fancy drink, all he could see was Jason's pale face. His gut churned and his chest burned and Tim needed to get this done.

Tim made his way past the line, hands in his pockets. He paused at the door as if perusing the menu from a distance, catching himself on the door frame, and oh so casually swiping his fingertips across the edge of the big bay window. That he left behind a quarter sized disk stuck to the glass, well. That was his business for at least the next minute.

Huffing as if displeased by the frankly illegible chalkboard, Tim turned away and continued down the block. It was midday, so the lunch rush was in full swing and while Tim was *very* good at his job, he wasn't willing to risk anyone noticing anything, weird timing included.

Instead, Tim took a right to break the line of sight between him and the coffee shop, and made his way to the first alley he saw. From there it was a quick fence hop and he was behind the coffee shop, at the very same door he had broken into last time he was here. To his surprise and delight, they hadn't even bothered to change the lock. Maybe they hadn't noticed his last visit, or maybe they just couldn't be bothered and decided to bank on Tim not coming back. Either way, picking a lock for the second time was a parlour trick and it wasn't like Tim had to worry about making too much noise with the hustle and bustle out front.

Speaking of, this next bit was going to rely on a little bit of luck.

Tim hadn't bothered with a precise timer, or a remote activation, so he just had to sit tight and wait for-

The crack and chime of all that breaking glass was only barely loud enough to hear as Tim's little gadget started vibrating, cycling through a range of frequencies since Tim wasn't quite good enough to clock the shattering frequency of a window by sight alone, but the immediate cries and shouts was much clearer. Footsteps thundered past, and Tim waited an extra couple of beats before creeping the door back open and ducking inside. He probably had between two and five minutes.

Last time he was here, he'd gone downstairs, following his gut instinct for illicit substances, but he'd nearly used the roof and Batman and Robin *had* which meant there must be stairs up, which was where Tim would put an office if he was planning this place. They weren't through the employee door he'd gone through last time, so he'd just go the opposite direction of those footsteps and cross his fingers.

Sure enough, as he followed the hallway to the back of the building, there was a set of stairs that presumably went all the way to the roof. Not that Tim needed to go that far.

At the first landing there was what looked more like a service door than anything professional, so Tim kept going. Worst case scenario he had some backtracking to do, but he also sort of figured the office

door would have *some* kind of label or sign or something. Just for clarity's sake if nothing else.

The next door did not, in fact, have a label but it *did* seem more like the kind of thing that would freak out an employee who just got told to 'see the boss upstairs' so Tim figured he was probably in the right place. Downstairs, the commotion was ongoing, so all he had to do was not fuck this up.

Piece of cake.

Or maybe not. The office was a mess, papers scattered across the desk and the floor, a filing cabinet with drawers hanging open perched in the corner, and a whiteboard full of incomprehensible acronyms.

Fuck, okay.

No time for subtlety, hopefully the mess would hide that Tim had been here because there was no way he was going to be able to replace all this perfectly.

Tim picked a pile in the bottom left corner and flipped through it. Mostly bills, a couple of handwritten letters with printing poor enough Tim elected not to waste time deciphering them and moved on. He kept his attention on addresses and context therein. If he could just find a supply requisition form, a familiar address from the shipping lists, or something that said in big black letters 'the crime is over here!' he'd be set.

He worked his way across the desk in a counter clockwise spiral, going off of the assumption that supplies would probably be a monthly concern rather than a daily one and would therefore live on the periphery of the desk. Unless they lived on the floor, but that'd be getting ahead of himself.

Bills, spreadsheets of inventory and shift schedules, several piles of what Tim could only assume were either in code or related to a creative process of some kind because he had zero context for why someone would keep so much paperwork related to beanie babies and house plant care in their work office. The name *Hellfern* repeated across various correspondences, scratching at something in Tim's brain, but he honestly couldn't say where he knew it from. There were a few sheets with chemical equations scrawled across them, but even those didn't seem insidious, most of the compounds involved seeming reasonably edible.

Nothing that stuck out as a location he could go shake until the jackass responsible for poisoning a kid fell out.

The shouting below was starting to die down, which meant most of the glass was probably cleaned up and they'd moved on to their own little investigation phase. He needed to get going, sooner rather than later.

Tim didn't curse, because he was a professional stealth operative, *thank you very much*, but he did kick a pile of papers on the floor. Pages scattered about the office satisfyingly, raining down gently as if they too had no idea where the fuck they were supposed to go even though people were counting on them, even though one of their *kids* was *sick*-

Staring up at him from the cheap linoleum, the very bottom of the pile he'd just punted, was the formula for ethyl chloride.

God he was an idiot.

He was also an idiot who was out of time.

Actually *taking* the pages was a stupid idea but there was no way Tim was going to be able to read all of this before someone came back upstairs, so he scooped up every sheet he was pretty sure had been in the pile to start with, and cut his losses.

At least it was proof of a connection. If it turned out there wasn't an actual location in here, he would have to come back tonight after all.

Tim would have liked to go back out the way he came, but he'd been up here longer than he'd intended and to be entirely honest he didn't really want to walk back past all the chaos of the broken window. He felt a little bad about the property damage and the possible injuries, even if this place was just a front for some nefarious poisoning plot.

So the roof it was. At this rate he was going to use every possible entrance to this building. Maybe he should keep an eye out for any Tim-sized vents, just in case.

He couldn't seen anyone yet, but he could very much hear movement echoing off the stairwell walls so even if wanted to brave the consequences of his actions, that was off the table. It was only another turn and around to the roof door, which was locked but at least he wasn't directly in view of anyone heading for the office. Probably.

His ceramic picks were once again a blessing because this door had some kind of circuit set up, similar to the one downstairs though not quite identical and Tim wasn't in a position to be reverse engineering anything at the moment. Juggling the picks and stack of papers wasn't his idea of a good time but it was fine. He only nearly electrocuted himself- or whatever it was this lock did- twice.

Now, Tim *should* flee sooner rather than later and just keep moving, but he didn't really feel like folding all of this crap up to shove in his belt, and he sure as hell wasn't going to do parkour while holding it and risk tearing just the section he needed so instead he decided to simply. Camp out here for a bit. Go through the paperwork and then just leave it under a rock or something up here and thus avoid the very low risk of someone finding him with it later and using that as evidence of his involvement.

Would that tell people exactly what he'd been looking at? Sure, yeah, but he was operating at as close to a sprint as he could right now and if he stayed the course then they wouldn't have *time* to prep for him before he'd already be there.

Hopefully. If he played his cards right.

It was a nice enough day, still sunny even if Tim could still see smoke drifting from the direction of Jason's apartment complex in the distance. At least no one had been seriously hurt.

Tim plopped himself down, crossing his legs and settling against the cool side of an air conditioning unit. Most of what he grabbed seem to be chemistry, which while interesting and handy for giving Tim a little better an idea of what he was working against (it looked like they'd been manufacturing and distributing a variety of semi-toxic compounds, tricky stuff that would build up in tissue if left unchecked and wouldn't flush itself without a lot of time or some sort of medical intervention) didn't give him a target.

Just as Tim was preparing to throw in the towel, he found what he was looking for. Just a little handwritten scribble in the margins of another page of equations, circling a couple compounds and noting down an address and a phone number.

Now all he had to do was prepare for a classic Gotham night out. Good thing he'd landed in this time period with his best pair of dancing shoes.

--

Getting to go for an out-and-out infiltration mission was like meeting up with an old friend for a few rounds at an arcade; nostalgic, sweet, and with just an edge of competitive exhilaration.

It physically pained Tim to leave behind his cape, sweet sweet life-saving kevlar weave that it was, but since Tim was sort of hoping to kick the shit out of an evil scientist tonight it was probably a bad idea to go out dressed as a vigilante that didn't exist yet and one day would. But it would have been an equally stupid idea to go out without the rest of his gear and barefaced, so in the end he'd gone with his tunic, leggings, gloves, bandoleers, a jacket thrown over a hoodie for the weather, and a domino mask for plausible deniability.

A casual vigilante look for all occasions and time periods.

Annoyingly, some of his own more exotic antidotes had gone bad in the time he'd been here; he'd taken the sensitive ones he'd been stashing in his fridge out when the kids started coming around regularly since he hadn't wanted any of them to see the blatantly suspicious vials and he just. Forgot to get an ice chest for them, or even to resynthesize and restock them.

The casualties were mostly for some of Ivy's work, a couple Joker Toxin variants, and Crane's go to modern fear gas, all of which theoretically didn't exist yet. It would probably be fine. He was kind of bummed about the loss of his solution to the Riddler's industrial strength itching powder, though. The first time he'd used it to get out of the consequences for an incorrect answer, Nygma had nearly cried.

Still, all he was really trying to do tonight was some recon and, depending on what there was to see, shut down operations. Actual medical outreach and retraction of product could be a tomorrow issue once he stopped production and hopefully gathered all their chemical and distribution data. Rome wasn't torn down in a day, and all that.

But that didn't mean Tim wasn't going to do as much damage as he could get away with.

The factory was relatively quiet on his approach. Not too surprising, given chemical manufacturing didn't have quite the same amount of screaming metal as machining, but still noteworthy since from a building of this size Tim would have expected at least a *little* more hustle and bustle. He circled the building, once, twice, making note of possible entrances and exits to try and keep an eye on when he was inside, and while Tim *could* wait for working hours to be over entirely (it really ought to be another twenty minutes or so unless they were working overtime which was always possible) that risked someone important leaving.

So he called it, scaling the side of the building and pointedly avoiding the exterior pipes on the off-chance they were hot. His gloves offered decent heat resistance but that didn't mean he wanted to push his luck.

In true Gotham architectural fashion, the factory had rooftop access panels. Honestly, Tim sometimes wondered if Bruce *had* played a little bit of the rich people politics he tended to dislike to get these things included in municipal building code or something. They were *everywhere* once you started looking for them.

Either way, they were incredibly convenient for any vigilante looking to get in somewhere they weren't supposed to be, and with a barely audible *click* behind him, Tim was inside.

He dropped onto a catwalk, rolling his weight from toe to heel to quiet his landing, and took stock. The layout was simple enough, a

variety of vats scattered about the factory floor, various workstations with partitions still occupied by workers in full-body protective equipment. Not outright hazmat suits, which was a relief for Tim frankly, but definitely a degree of careful he wasn't thrilled to see associated with what he knew to be food production.

Maybe they just felt *very* strongly about cross-contamination.

Their equipment was relatively standard, but pretty mismatched. Tim doubted it had all been bought together. The ground floor was relatively open concept, but about halfway up, various closed off rooms ringed the factory. It looked a little like a bunch of trailers had been stapled to the side of the building. Most of them seemed connected, but there were a couple with their own separate corrugated staircases. Offices, possibly some cold storage at a guess. Which meant if his target was here, odds were they'd be somewhere in there.

Now, if *Tim* were an evil scientist running an entire factory of nefarious poisons, where would he hang out?

As far from the majority of the product as possible.

Most of the vats were concentrated on the south side of the building, and of those that were closer to the north, the majority were clustered towards the west. That left five maybe-offices in and around the northeast corner. Of *those* only two had floor-facing windows, which while potentially distracting was a must for an overseer position. How could you put pressure on your underlings, after all, when they knew you couldn't see them? The cameras throughout the place covered that as well, but there was just something *special* about an oppressive

window.

And then Tim had a choice.

Everyone downstairs doing their semi-legitimate jobs were, technically, henchpeople, making them fair game and potential threats in however things were about to go down. If they had the competence to do the chemical work here, they had to have the awareness that what they were making was incredibly dangerous. There was culpability in that, and if Tim wanted to argue his way through the ethical debate, that *could* justify taking a stealth-combat approach to cleaning up the factory floor before heading for the office. It would ensure everyone involved was in the same place to face the consequences of their choices.

On the other hand, they were probably just trying to make a living. Lots of products were potentially dangerous, and while Tim couldn't be sure what they'd been told about their positions, the factory certainly hadn't had anything food-related on any kind of signage outside. They might not know. And Tim *was* about to fuck up their livelihoods, the least he could do was let them get out of here with as few injuries as possible.

On the other *other* hand, he could maybe just cause a little problem on the factory floor to attract attention from the offices and hopefully draw out the jackass in charge of this whole situation. Or he could take out just the people working right under them, since they'd be hard to see go down and would clear Tim's access to the stairs. Or he could-

As Tim schemed, his gaze tracked back, forth, and around the

building, looking for hidey holes, vulnerabilities, and potential hazards, and it was on one of those sweeps he caught what had to be the decontamination showers. His instinct was to look away and mind the privacy of whoever was washing down but-

Tim knew that guy.

It was the guy he'd assaulted on the street the other day, just as wet as he'd been after Tim shoved him face-first into the wet ground. And here he was, minding his own business and trying to to die of horrible chemical exposure.

Could Tim really be a massive dick to this guy *twice* in a row? That seemed a little unreasonable.

Okay, so his plan had to get the bad guy to reveal themselves, assuming they were even *here*, shut down operations long enough for Tim to gather evidence he could pass on to someone to get this whole scheme taken down permanently, and not involve that one guy Tim had fucked with because he was an idiot.

Simple enough.

Tim was going to scream so much about this later.

In the present however, Tim really needed to get a move on. He

couldn't crouch in what was practically plain sight forever.

But the decontamination shower *did* give Tim an idea. This place had to have a solid fire suppression system, right?

Finding the smoke alarms wasn't so bad, and it was the work of a quick grapple-and-swing to get in throwing distance. From there, all he had to do was coat one side of a smoke pellet with a bit of an adhesive and pitch it to stick right under a sprinkler and wait.

One beat, and then another, smoke leaking a little slower than the standard explosion because of the reduced surface area, and then *finally* an alarm got with the program and started screaming. A moment later, water started pouring.

If Tim hadn't already been pretty sure this whole setup was slapdash, the complete lack of cohesion as the various workers moved to frantically seal their own particular deadly chemicals and then get out of the building as quickly as possible would have clued him in. They weren't even moving in an orderly fashion to get outside, for fuck's sake.

Tim hoped nothing was left exposed that would react badly to water. Better move quickly, just to be safe.

The upper rooms *were* emptying out, but the two Tim actually cared about weren't. Maybe they were empty. Maybe he'd just picked the worst possible night to show up.

Or maybe one of those rooms had the security feeds, and whoever was in there knew there was no fire.

Only one way to find out.

Tim swung down, thankful for the jacket keeping him at least a little dry. He always forgot how aggressive industrial sprinklers were until he was standing under them. His hair was flat in seconds and if it weren't for the waterwicking lenses in his domino he wouldn't be able to see a thing. As it was, he could sort of read the plaque by the first room's door.

There was that name again, Hellfern.

At least he knew he was in the right place, even if Tim still couldn't put his finger on just who they actually *were*.

Up until he cracked the door, anyways, and then he felt like an idiot for forgetting.

The goggles, the coat with the tacky skull buttons, and that stupid bubble gas mask.

Karl Hellfern. Doctor Death. Bruce and Cass had rearranged his face back in the day for selling war crimes in a can. They'd caught wind of him selling chemical weapons in soda bottles to the Russian mob and followed him all the way to the Middle East to catch him. The cases were so similar Tim felt like an idiot for missing the connection. Sure this was a little closer to his earlier extortion schemes than the outright terrorism he'd made his brand later, but at their cores, the schemes were basically the same.

Make poison, widely distribute it, profit off selling it first and then again off selling the cure.

Presumably, this was the early stages. Kill enough poor people to get attention from the rich, and use the pile of bodies as a warning of what was in *their* future if they didn't pay up. Maybe Gotham Juice had already made its way into upmarket grocery stores. Maybe not.

Either way, he'd gotten one of Tim's kids. He was going to make this *hurt*.

There were no sprinklers in here and for just a second Hellfern was completely frozen, the alarm wailing and Tim dripping on the cheap carpeting. He stood in front of a console and a wall of monitors, each showing a different angle of the factory floor, and none showing the roof or rafters at all. Amateur.

And then he spun, stretching a gloved hand for a switch at the edge of the console and Tim was moving. Whatever that was for, it was probably something deeply unpleasant, and Tim needed Hellfern intact enough to give him the antidotes for everything he'd been feeding into Gotham's citizens.

Hellfern tried to go for something in his coat, but Tim wasn't interested in whatever c-tier bullshit he wanted to pull, cracking a fist first right into that mask, splintering it and ensuring they'd be equally vulnerable to any compound he tried to release, and snapping a knee into his elbow, fucking up his grip. Tim wasn't interested in giving him any sort of credit for trying to hit back, swinging a wide punch that Tim caught and used to throw him over his shoulder.

He hit the ground with a crunch and started screaming, and oh. Yeah it was probably a bad idea to go tossing around the guy carrying a bunch of dangerous chemicals. Whoops. Guess that was karma for *poisoning kids you fucking monster,* not to mention the burns still pulling at Tim's own back.

The coat was clearly doing a portion of its job backwards, soaking through and keeping whatever it was close to the skin. Tim pulled him off the floor by his collar, and wow okay he didn't like that weird orange puddle hissing against the carpet. Hm. Comeuppance was one thing, but Tim wasn't in the business of watching people melt.

Peeling the lab coat off of Hellfern was simple enough after Tim boxed him in the jaw again to keep him disoriented, not that the screaming had really died down. Once it was off Tim could see he'd apparently had a whole little evil apothecary strapped to his torso, which seemed like bad planning for anyone expecting to be in a fight, but maybe Hellfern had been confident he'd have space if it came to that.

He clearly hadn't been expecting someone to just walk into his office and toss him like a beanbag.

Tim kind of wished he'd put up more of a fight, but that was on him for forgetting what he was dealing with. Sure Crane tended to be a real threat in close quarters, but most evil chemists weren't exactly known for their ability to throw a punch. Tim couldn't find it in himself to pity a man who might one day decide it was a good idea to turn people into petrol, but he had people he needed to look after, and for better or for worse this bastard could help with that.

To get that, Tim needed him to talk, and apparently he had a pain threshold somewhere in the negatives, so he'd have to do something about the acid-poison-whatever.

Good thing he knew where the decontamination showers were.

Dragging Hellfern across the factory, Tim stripped him as they went, tucking the harness of villainous intent into one of his own straps for safekeeping, until Hellfern was in nothing but his underwear and then he tossed him into one of the cordoned off stalls and turned the thing on full blast. Between the fairly high pressure spray and the sprinklers still soaking the whole place, it wasn't long until the screaming faded into out of breath sobs.

His back was a mess of blooming blisters and peeling skin, blood, pus, and a stinking orange liquid washing down the drain until he looked less like a sponge used in a tuberculosis ward and was just covered in open wounds like plenty of others Tim had seen.

Tim let the water run clear for another minute, breathing the anger that had caught him off guard in the office out into the chill of the

temperature controlled air around him. He forced the way Jason had looked on the floor of his apartment to the back of his mind.

Focus. There was a job to do. It rarely helped to be overly emotional during an interrogation.

The water overhead slowed to a drip and Tim snapped off the shower, stepping up to bodily block the entrance to the stall. Water lapped at his boots on its path down the drain and Hellfern cringed away from him. Too bad.

“Evening doc. We need to have a chat.”

Chapter End Notes

> Howdy folks! You know how I lamented previous chapters being nearly 6k? Well this one was coming up on 7. Good lord. But! I got to where I wanted to, give or take. Mostly I stopped where I did because I didn't feel like figuring out the Doc's character voice just yet. I'll figure it out.
>
> Speaking of! This fellow is a blend of the original Golden Age jackass and then the pre-crisis guy that popped up in Batgirl #42. I did not feel like writing him with all the fucked up teeth and bone issues and such, so there's none of the monstrous version here. He's just a bad person who's good at science. And also a little bitch :p I did sort of pull him out of a hat, but that's because I made the whole poison drink schemes and Then figured out who was doing it, and it just fit his MO so well. But I Did decide it was him back when I first threw out the shady coffee shop so if it feels like he just came out of nowhere, thats because of bad writing not bad planning. I went back (very recently) to add his name to the chapter where Tim steals the chemicals, but honestly I've had nearly every villain just kind of turn up and this guy wasn't going to be an exception.
>
> Anyways, this chapter was only a few days late and I think its a

lot of fun! Tim! Causes! Problems! Which, tbf could be the name of this entire fic. Thanks for all of your patience on it coming out, and a big thank you to everyone who's left a comment I swear I do read them all even if I've gotten bad at replying. Each and every one really brightens up my day. Have a wonderful day <33

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For some reason, Tim's voice gave Hellfern a second wind and the coward tried to make a run for it. As if there was anywhere to go that wasn't directly into Tim's effective 'go fuck yourself' zone.

Tim caught him before he made it two steps with a hand around his throat and pressed him back into the shower wall, ignoring the cry as imperfect plastic scratched at open wounds. He kept his grip precisely uncomfortable; a little pressure on the windpipe and fingers right over arteries, waiting. Warning.

"Come on, none of that. You're the one who decided to start poisoning people just minding their own business and we both know you *wanted* people to catch on. What's wrong with me wanting to talk about it?" Tim's tone was conversational, but it was a concentrated effort not to flex his grip just to feel Hellfern *squirm*. The information had to come first.

"It isn't *ready* yet," Hellfern hissed, one hand weakly slapping at Tim's wrist, which no. Tim lifted him a little, all skin and bones he couldn't weigh much more than Bart had during the worst of puberty when he had to basically constantly eat so he wouldn't wither away. "I was supposed to have more *time*. I'm still testing distribution patterns, no one has even *died*."

That was good to hear, the kind of relief Tim hadn't even realized he'd needed, like a well timed tide that threatened to sweep his focus away into a million other places, split across an entire world of

hypotheticals and damage control. But it wasn't actually what Tim needed right now.

What he *did* need was for Hellfern to take this seriously. To understand that Tim would hurt him if he didn't tell him what he wanted to know.

"Just because you don't think people suffering is anything special doesn't mean no one else noticed. What, you figured just because you were doing this here, that the people you're hurting can't get treatment meant no one saw it? My people saw." Tim pressed him a little harder into the wall, letting his existing injuries do all the hard work. "*I* saw."

Tim only half hoped that would be enough to convince Hellfern to spill. The other half was still baying bloody murder, preoccupied with the notion that all of his victims so far, Maggie's sick friends, *Jason,* were nothing more than *market research* to this bastard. No one had died, but they so easily could have. The only reason they were alive was because Hellfern hadn't been trying to kill them yet.

And Tim hadn't seen a thing until Maggie pointed out what was happening.

There were near misses and then there were *mistakes*, and Tim had had his fair share of both, but this was a mistake that could have cost him *everything*. Tim couldn't afford mistakes like this. People trusted him to take care of them, he couldn't be making mistakes like this.

But he had. And while he couldn't *un*poison all those people, he could still fix it. Still make things right.

So long as this waste of oxygen and pyrex started talking. Now.

Maybe the silence was because he was out of breath, maybe Tim's grip was a little too tight (he knew it wasn't, knew exactly the points of resistance if he wanted someone to talk just like he knew how to make them *stop*), but whatever it was that kept Hellfern's mouth shut, Tim wasn't having it.

This wasn't working. New tactic. Something to put the fear of *Tim* into him. It wasn't hard to guess what Hellfern was afraid of, these self-obsessed genius types were all the same on that front.

Tim dropped Hellfern back to the floor, gave him just long enough to cough once, twice, and then he kicked him in the side of the head. Not *hard*, just a kickball bunt. Get the ball rolling. Make a point. "How about this. You tell me everywhere you've been sending your fucking *product*, every front, every grocery store that has even a drop of your poison, and then you tell me the antidote, and I *won't* reduce your brain to scrambled eggs."

That got Hellfern's mouth open, but it wasn't what Tim wanted to hear. "You have no idea what it is you're trying to ruin. You're nothing but a two-bit thug who got *lucky* enough to stumble on my operation and now you're trying to stand in the way of enterprise! I am master of the breakdown of the human body, an artisan of cellular destruction! I can name more ways to activate lysosomes and tear apart protein membranes than you know to cook an egg! I could tell you exactly what you want to know, and it would mean nothing to

you, you artless *brute*."

In another world, Tim would just keep kicking. Make good on his threat, tear away the one thing Hellfern prized more than money until he was drooling and insensate and couldn't remember his own *name* let alone the chemical formula for anything as innocuous as salt. Tim was decent enough at chemistry that with this facility's resources *surely* he could figure out his own cures. He could do it.

It wouldn't even be that hard. The human brain was remarkably vulnerable to things like steel-toed boots with a grudge. He could probably do it in two hits if he aimed well.

But it would take Tim *time* to figure this out on his own, and every second he wasted was a second countless people were suffering.

There was more at stake than Tim's stupid ego. There was still time to fix things.

So instead of playing hacky sack with Hellfern's skull, he needed another angle. Fine

Tim planted one foot on Hellfern's throat, plucked the belt of villainous vials from where he had tucked it, and considered his options. It was hard to say for certain but he could guess at a couple of these compounds. Several that would react violently to oxygen, making them a no-go if he wanted to keep a firm grip on the reins here. Some that Tim thought might be lye based, meaning absolutely

horrific consequences if exposed to human flesh which *Tim* certainly didn't want to see. But this little vial of green... why Tim was pretty sure that was a poor man's fear gas, similar base but too watery to really *punch* right. Tim could fix that.

In fact...

He slipped the vial from its holster and held it up to the factory halogens as if that would really help him see it better. The colour wasn't bad, but the consistency was all wrong and it looked like there was some crystallization at the bottom and some emulsion skimming across the top. Whatever he'd used, this was only stable because it sucked. Maybe Hellfern gave it a good shake before using it. *Tim* on the other hand, just so happened to have an incredibly aggressive stabilizing agent tucked away. Sure it was the last of his Joker Venom antidote, but it'd do to blend things together a little better and it even ought to curb the worst of the hallucinations. Instead it would theoretically just activate his fear response and then Tim would be set.

Thus in the name of drama, Tim gave it a quick flick, resettled his weight on Hellfern, and drew out a vial of his own.

"An artless brute who knows more about what you've got than you do. For an 'artisan' you sure don't seem to have much in the way of finesse," Tim said, dragging his boot up Hellfern's neck, less than gently knocking his chin back and forcing him to watch as Tim pulled the stopper from first one vial and then the other, holding them in his teeth. Eyeballing this was probably a dumb move, but the *style* points he'd get if he pulled this off-

It'd be fine.

Big breath just in case, a quick reminder that his respirator was in the left belt fifth pocket from the bottom, and then as if he wasn't doing something fucking insane, Tim poured one, two, three drops of his antidote into the baby's first fear toxin. Gave it a second to be sure he wasn't about to gas them both, watched as it bubbled a little, then finished off the vial when nothing immediately dangerous happened. Beneath him, Hellfern shrieked.

"*What are you doing?*" Despite the fury in his tone, he was stock still. Probably scared to jostle Tim's terrible idea. Which was fine, Tim had already planned to do that himself.

Careful not to spill anything, and incidentally putting enough of his weight onto Hellfern to crush his breath right out of him, Tim popped one stopper back into place and then the other, swirled, and watched as the solution blended and the crystals began to dissolve.

Tucking his empty vial away again, Tim grinned down at Hellfern, who was flushing an interesting shade of terrified. "Now I'm not going to pretend I have any kind of fancy doctorate, but I do know a thing or two about Doc Crane's work, and let me say he would be *disappointed* to see such a cheap recreation. Don't worry, I can keep a secret. So long as you tell me what I want to know, anyways. I could *also* do some hands on research and go tell the doc about what this fun little mix did later. Either or. I'm not that picky."

Beneath his heel, Hellfern was starting to edge onto the blue side of the spectrum, and a distant little voice, a voice that was sitting by Jason's bedside at the clinic hissed to *press harder.*

Instead, he stepped back. Dropped down into a classic vigilante squat and cocked his head, all sharp-toothed *Terror of the Night.* Even if his outfit was wrong, would never be right again, even if the chemical burns on his back groaned their displeasure, even if Robin had only had the chance to be the Boy Wonder to these people, it was a routine easy as breathing.

Tim flipped the stopper back out of the vial in his hand, sealing his thumb over the opening, and pressed an arm like a bar across Hellfern's chest when he tried to crawl away. He leaned in, nice and close until his breath fogged up that stupid fucking bubble mask. "So what'll it be? Wanna do some more research, *doctor*?"

A beat. Another.

"You're insane," Hellfern croaked, words dragging like sandpaper.

"Wrong answer." Tim gave the vial another quick shake, reaching up with his other hand and peeling the fractured glass off of Hellfern's face.

Shaking, desperate like a wild thing, Hellfern tried to thrash away and Tim cursed, dropping his arm back into position and throwing a leg over Hellfern's twisting torso until he was straddling him and basically crushing him between his thighs. It took pretty much Tim's entire body weight to hold him down, thank god Hellfern was a scrawny one. This was why Tim hated when he didn't have time to restrain targets at least a little.

Hellfern had apparently forgotten about his own injuries, because his resistance died down in a matter of seconds, blood oozing out beneath him as he wheezed under Tim's grip.

Through luck more than anything else, Tim's thumb hadn't shifted out of place but now there was a fresh layer of irritation glazed across his anger like sheaves of glass about to splinter. Fear made people stupid, Tim knew. Didn't mean he had to like it.

Also didn't mean he wasn't about to make things much, much scarier for poor Doctor Hellfern in just a second.

At least all that extra motion must have gotten the blend all the more aromatic.

Tim leaned forward again, pressing harder with his arm as he went to keep the doctor still, and then, just before he shifted his thumb and gave Hellfern a whiff of his own creation, he started rambling.

"The records, the records in the office. Everywhere I've dealt with, all of my research on distribution, it's all there, every bottle is written down. Didn't want to lose any data, I've got all the records." His voice was a pulp mill, churning up wet shreds of words and splinters of ideas.

Still, Tim didn't let up. "And the antidote?"

A sob this time, thick with hatred, shame, and fear like sewage. "It'll clear on it's own. It's a short term bioaccumulant that unless reinforced will start to breakdown, goes faster in dead tissue than living, doesn't leave a trace. A few doses of the right enzymes will speed up the process, fair amount of variation based on body mass and toxicity levels. Such a *waste*."

"Tell me."

And pressed flat with liquid terror an inch from his nose, seconds from his brain if Tim so much as twitched his thumb, Hellfern did.

It ought to be satisfying.

It *was*, sort of. Mostly Tim was miles away, planning the best way to acquire and distribute what the victims need, painfully aware that he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd made this better, made it *right*. Equally aware that right here, right now, there was so little he could actually *do*.

He needed to check the office, confirm the information was actually there, and then he needed to decide what to do with Hellfern. Then he could move on to helping. One foot in front of the other.

Well. Technically what to do with Hellfern was a twofold problem. What to do with him while Tim checked the office, and then what to do with him in general. The cops were the obvious answer, so long as Tim could pile enough proof on Hellfern's prone body to get him actually charged with something other than owning a shady business or two in Gotham which was utterly unremarkable in and of itself.

First things first, Tim decided he hadn't actually made Hellfern's day miserable enough, and Tim *did* actually have faith in his own chemistry abilities. This wouldn't kill him, just give him a shitty night. Tim figured he had it coming.

So with a careless sort of precision, Tim held his breath, slipped his thumb off the mouth of the vial, and drove a sharp punch into Hellfern's gut, forcing a gasp and a lungful of toxin.

He would have liked to leave it at that, but he was kind of liable to make sure he hadn't just poisoned the jackass more than intended, so Tim recapped the vial and waited.

The issue with calling the cops was that Tim had negative ways to explain his own presence, and while he had his domino on that might actually make everything worse. That would make him a new and emerging *entity* in official channels. Hell, *Batman* was still flickering in and out the papers as more speculation than man. Giving himself an actual tangible presence would be absurd in Gotham's current atmosphere and it would also be basically inviting every literate mook in the city to start talking about his business and Tim absolutely did not want that. He wasn't even supposed to *be* here, he couldn't have people *looking* for him.

How could he get the cops here while leaving as little evidence of himself as possible?

Beneath his glove, Hellfern started to shake, started to hyperventilate. Tim waited.

Tim's first thought was, of course, property destruction. Set something off to draw the eye and get out of dodge. Except if Tim was going to explode anything in here, he'd really like to take some time to do some equations on how best to not accidentally commit his own act of domestic terrorism. The equipment and chemicals in here were volatile enough he *still* wasn't comfortable with dumping a bunch of water on everything, let alone adding *fire* to the mix.

That would be a recipe for disaster.

It was hard to tell with all the damp whether or not Hellfern's skin was clammy, but he *had* gone pale and started to cry, which was something.

What he really needed was for someone *else* to call the cops.

Hell, he needed the good doctor here to be someone else's problem entirely while he got to work. Who did he know that would come running at the first hint of *crime*?

When he put it like that, it was obvious.

He didn't even have to try and figure out how to explain things to *Batman* when technically the contact information he had was for Matches Malone. And if that so happened to end in the caped crusader dropping in later, well, how would poor *Alvin Draper* see that coming? All he'd have to do was place a call, panic into the phone for a minute or two, and then run for it and Batman would be able to walk right in and close the case. It might raise some questions that would be incredibly awkward to answer later, but Bruce definitely knew Tim was kind of shady so it wasn't like that would actually be anything new. Surely Tim could just keep dodging Bruce's increasingly insistent investigations until something came up and his curiosity died down.

Tim decided it had been long enough and given that Hellfern's heart didn't seem to be giving out and rather than start frothing at the mouth he was screaming obnoxiously loud, the off-the-cuff chemistry had worked. Still, better safe than sorry so Tim slipped a zip-tie from one of his belts and used it to loop Hellfern's wrists around the showerhead. He was clearly too worn out to do much more than shiver and weep, so it would do fine to keep him in place.

The office was still dry when Tim checked it out. There was a patch where he'd dripped in that first moment, a little trail of droplets to the console and back, and of course a hissing hole in the carpet where that orange liquid was doing its damndest to make a dent in the corrugated tin underneath. It wasn't going well, probably only really made to eat through organic materials, but it still set Tim's teeth on edge.

Probably best to give it a wide berth.

The filing cabinets in here were thankfully better organized than those from the coffee shop, though it took Tim a minute to catch on without any kind of labels. The folders were organized by project, each poison getting its own assortment, with all relevant data about development, testing, supply sourcing, production, and intended distribution inside. One project spanned a dozen folders, and sure enough it's the only one with evidence of execution of that last part, though it looked like Hellfern had gotten a fair amount out there between the coffee and the juice. There was a note about delays with the soda brand due to mysterious supply chain issues, presumably Tim's little robbery. It was nice to know that even if he hadn't caught on he'd done *something* to slow down this whole operation.

There was more than enough evidence here to get Hellfern in some serious trouble. While there weren't any documents explicitly laying out his scheme, it wasn't difficult to put two and two together, and the distinct lack of any reference to antidotes could even be used to make the whole thing look worse than it was; a mass murder rather than mass extortion.

Tim took note of all the listed grocery and convenience stores that had gotten talked into taking a shipment or two, resolving to buy out their entire stock if he had to to get the stuff off the shelves. Of course, if the Batman thing worked out all right then hopefully the truth that Gotham Juice was a bogus brand and the coffee shop was a front would make the news and Tim would be saved the hassle.

In the mean time, he collected the most relevant folders and brought them back onto the warehouse floor. Hellfern was still hanging in place and probably would be for a while, so Tim took the time to clear and dry off a worktable near the showers and carefully laid everything out. For a moment, he considered trying to highlight the table with reflective tape or something, but decided that he could just mention the documents in the call to Matches and that would be enough. It wasn't like Bruce was stupid, he'd notice the very obviously compiled evidence once he got in here.

And then it was show time. There *had* been a phone in the office, but Hellfern was making quite the racket and Tim suspected that having background screaming wasn't going to help him sell his own totally-not-responsible-for-this panic. Instead, Tim emptied Hellfern's pockets of change, a couple dollars in quarters which would be more than enough, and made his way to the payphone he had clocked a few blocks over.

The factory workers had cleared out, presumably because a muster point within a mile of this place would be suicidal, which left Tim a nice clear path at street level, which was convenient and gave him the chance to sketch out the very basic outline o a conversational script. Points to hit, tears to jerk, and an approximate timer. It was fairly late so odds were decent Bruce was already out patrolling, Tim probably wouldn't even have to actually *talk* to him, would probably get voicemail.

The thought was equal parts a relief and a stab wound.

It wasn't a big deal. Tim knew a thing or two about those. At least out here he couldn't hear Hellfern's screaming anymore. It did, in fact, make Tim feel a little bad after the third or so minute. Hellfern deserved it, he *did*, but fear toxin was nasty.

Tim told himself again that Hellfern had to face the consequences of his choices, that maybe being the victim of a couple of substances one after the other might make him second-guess his career path, that Tim had curbed the worst of the effects anyways.

By the time he reached the empty frame of the phone booth, Tim almost believed it.

To start with he gave it two quarters, hopefully long enough to say what he needed to but short enough to cut off too many questions if it came to that. He didn't have the receipt Matches had given him, but it didn't matter much. It hadn't been a choice to memorize the phone number, to etch the feel of that tiny life line into his palms. Beneath his gloves the keys were worn smooth, maybe by hands maybe by exposure, and that didn't matter either. Tim had grown up with analogue phones, had used payphones like this before he'd had his own phone. Dialing was just musty muscle memory.

What *did* matter was the sound of the dial tone and the anxiety trying to wrap its hands around Tim's throat.

Fuck he hoped he could do this.

The line clicked and there was staticky silence. Some kind of weakness in the connection, probably, but it was like having a shell full of steel wool pressed to his ear. Tim could swear he heard wind for a moment before he realized that Bruce might not know which alter ego this phone belonged to and thus might not be able to answer.

He needed to say something to get the ball rolling, but all of his scripts, every planned word escaped him. It was all he could do to bite his tongue on the word *Bruce* and avoid embarrassing himself.

Instead, he drew on every scrap of panic he'd felt when he'd realized that Jean-Paul Valley wasn't going to listen to him and Bruce was in less than no shape to help and nowhere nearby even if he could. He thought about when he'd believed Dick had died in an explosion, when Cass had left Gotham with no intention to return, when he'd first realized that Jason wanted to *hurt* Bruce. It wasn't fun to work himself into a panic like this, heartrate spiking, breath coming short, but the best acting was honest and Tim couldn't afford to be caught out *now* of all times.

"*Matches*." Not the right name, but it was close, it was *so close* and it had been on the receipt so he had an excuse to use it. "I need help. I've found a monster and I can't- I didn't mean to hurt him I swear, at least not like this but I *did* and I can't go to the cops. He deserves a cell, he *does*, he was poisoning *kids*, Matches, but I hurt him so bad, they'll take me too and I can't leave the kids, I-"

Tim would have kept going, clinging to this one chance to be even a little bit honest, a little bit weak, more tightly than he meant to. It had just been so *long*, and now he could finally, finally ask his dad for any help at all. It wasn't fair how badly he wanted it.

But Tim was well aware that fairness was something made not something found.

"Kid? Where are you, what're ya talkin' about?" The accent was as real as ever and it made the concern sound so *genuine* that it could bleed Tim dry.

"I'm at a payphone," Tim answered automatically like this parody of Bruce's voice was a hammer to his patellar tendon. Stupid thing to say

of course, that wasn't what he was asking. Tim's mission brain kept going before he could stop it. "Industrial district. Corner by the Schroeder steel mill, less than a block south of where I left him. He's not going anywhere but I can't kill him and if I call the cops I lose *everything*."

That wasn't even an exaggeration. If the cops found out about him they might find his kids, might throw them into Gotham's foster system. Might find his warehouse, ruin Jones' life yet again, and kneecap his medication before it could ever get *anywhere*. Hell, they could even realize he was committing wild amounts of fraud to cover for the fact he didn't legally exist and then *he'd* be looking at theoretical jail time. Everything was balanced on the knife's edge of no one having noticed it yet, and calling the cops here and now might finally tip them off to things being afoot in the Alley.

"Who did you hurt? And what's this about poison? You can get outta there, kid, and I'll make sure a call gets out, but I gotta know what to tell 'em first." That was actually an excellent lie, Tim was impressed. Thought he was a little surprised Bruce was letting him book it at all rather than just telling him to hide. Still, gift horses and all that.

And Tim couldn't let himself be out done on the performance front, so he clawed back some of his hard-earned hysteria and started talking at high speed. A little truth, a lot of lies, all frantic. "Some trashbag, name on the door was Hellfern. All I know is his company's been putting shit in juice and selling it to folks and they're getting sick. A paramedic mentioned ethyl chloride poisoning and I realized it wasn't an accident. Came to give him a piece of my mind and things got out of hand. He had these vials of crap in his pockets and they broke and he just started *screaming* and he won't fucking *stop*."

"Kid, you need to breathe," Matches' voice was remarkably calm, if a little out of breath. Maybe he was on the move? "You're gonna be

okay, I'll get this all squared away. No one'll havta know you were there. Just take a second and get your head back on before you get movin'. It's too late to be wandering around like a yahoo."

It was good advice, even if it sounded a little bit like it belonged in the 1940s, and if anyone bothered to ask Tim would say that the reason he followed it was to continue the act, because Bruce could probably hear his breathing over the line and he needed this to seem legitimate, needed Bruce to believe he was scared.

Needed it to be a lie because it couldn't be true right now.

"I- yeah. Okay. Thanks. I didn't- I wasn't sure this was a good idea. Wasn't sure you'd answer or even care, it's not like you know me as anything other than-" Tim meant to keep going, meant to leach a little bit of the venom swimming in his lungs into the air, but he hadn't gotten this far by ignoring his surroundings, and as he leaned against the frame of the phone booth, tilting his head back to try and catch a glimpse of the sky, he saw the glint of a scope.

Aimed right at him, on an otherwise empty street.

"Oh *fuck*."

Tim dropped the phone and dove out of one of the windowless panels just in time for the thunder of a shot to split the air and a bullet to split the thin aluminum of the frame. There was no decent cover, he wasn't wearing his fucking *cape* and even that couldn't take a direct

hit from a sniper rifle anyways, all he could do was get out of the light and try to fuck up the angles.

If they were half decent at their job it might not matter anyways. Not if they could still see him.

Which, if he was willing to throw to the wind all plausible deniability about what he was, he could actually stop. And it was that or getting *shot*, so.

For the first time in months, in a motion that had been second nature since he was thirteen years old, Tim pulled a smoke pellet from his belt and dropped it at his feet, quickly ducking low and away from his last position.

Another shot cracked the concrete where he'd been standing, but at least now Tim had a hope in hell of not getting immediately perforated. He had to close the distance, get to the shooter, but his smoke screen likely didn't reach the foot of the building and it would dissipate in the night breeze too fast for Tim to waste any time.

The trick to a sniper was always in the angles.

Tim twisted slightly to reach one of his hind compartments, and it was by a combination of luck and his own packing decision to put his flash bombs on the back of his belt that saved him from losing another organ.

The next bullet cut through the weave of his tunic, tearing a shallow furrow across his side, and blowing a hole in the back of his jacket before he even heard the sound of the shot. Then the pain hit and Tim turned his stumble into a roll.

So the shooter had thermal vision. Fuck.

At least this should still work.

His side screamed, his back ached, his lungs *burned*, and then to top it off he dropped a flashbang in front of himself with nothing to protect him but a domino and his own eyelids. He couldn't see jack or shit but he had bought himself seconds at best so he ran for the base of the building. It was no fun aiming a sniper down a building so at the very least he'd get a decrease in calibre which maybe his suit could handle.

It was better than letting them pick him off in the street.

Tim nearly ran headfirst into the side of the warehouse, managing to catch himself at the last second as the spots in his eyes cleared enough for him to see the brickwork. Not the easiest to climb, but Tim hadn't exactly made a career off of 'easy' so he was halfway up the side quickly enough. God but he was thankful for his gloves this time around. His palms still stung from the heat of Jason's apartment building earlier and he didn't need to scrape more skin off of his fingertips. They also helped quiet his ascent, which bought him a little extra time while the would-be assassin tried to figure out where he'd gone.

A glance upward showed him the dark shape of a barrel, sweeping back and forth as the shooter searched, and Tim fought down the urge to go for a grapple to close the gap. Normal people didn't carry grapple launchers and Alvin was supposed to be mostly normal, he couldn't afford to-

Actually, fuck it. The cat was already out of the bag on him not being what he seemed and he didn't really want to get actually shot. He was already going to have to go see Leslie about the graze, and he wasn't looking forward to her concern and disapproval. It would only be worse if she had to dig a bullet out of him.

Flat to the side of a building wasn't actually a better angle for grappling than shooting, at least not when there wasn't any kind of overhanging roof to take advantage of, so Tim was going to have to be a little stupid about this.

Tim gave himself a count of two, probably more time than he should have but it was worth it to catch a breath. He brought his feet up to join his hands, a motion that ripped open just about every scab he had and the edges of the graze yawned wider in complaint, and shoved himself off the wall with all the force he could muster, going for his grapple.

Timing was important, not the least bit because if he fucked it up he'd break a few bones at best, but Tim was half convinced the second he got off the wall he was going to catch another bullet, and he wanted the security of that sharp ninety degree angle back as soon as he gave it up. Still, the jump did its job and he was able to lodge his grapple into the mortar at the top of the building.

This shooter clearly knew what they were doing, so while Tim was a little disappointed they didn't stick their head over the edge to look down for him at the sound, he wasn't surprised. That sort of thing was a great way to get immediately taken out by someone with quick reflexes, whereas lying in wait tended to leave you vulnerable to an opponent who could think ahead.

Good thing Tim was both the type to take initiative and have a plan.

It was always possible, of course, that the shooter would be ready for him at the top. Which meant it was Tim's job to fuck with his expectations.

Coming straight up would be putting himself in a nice pretty barrel, so the trick was going to be in the lines of motion.

Instead of stopping his momentum from the grapple by catching the ledge and pulling himself up with control, probably the kindest option on his poor aching body, Tim kicked off the wall up, over, and *twisted* with one hand just under the ledge and the other abandoning the grapple entirely to wrap around his own torso, grab a throwing disk, and guide him into a cartwheel still half off the side and then he was landing on his feet in a crouch a good four feet away from where his grapple still hung and the shooter's attention rested.

Tim was feeling pretty good about that maneuver until he realized just who he was looking at and then he was back to trying to figure out how to avoid getting murdered.

Floyd Lawton. *Deadshot.*

Not the worst possibility if someone was going to hire an assassin about Tim, but very far from someone Tim wanted pointing a gun at him.

Fucking hell.

No time for a wind up to throw, not with Lawton already snapping those arm cannons to him, so Tim flicked the disk, all wrist, speed, and no power but hopefully enough to disrupt his aim, and stepped back off the side of the building.

This time he did catch himself on the ledge, but he wasn't happy about it. Beating Deadshot in a fight wasn't *impossible* but it would be a massive pain in the ass and Tim was pretty much done with today. He was really starting to feel the blood loss in the slight shake of his fingers and the thin film of glue over the top of his thoughts. Any fight would have to be quick, and the only kind of quick fight with Deadshot tended to be the ones where people died.

So could Tim run?

If he did, he'd just have to deal with this fight again later, possibly with his kids around. Running inspired *chase* and while Deadshot did

occasionally give up targets that weren't worth the hassle, it was easier to get that title by making him hurt than by making him hunt.

Tim had to stay.

In the general sense; if he stayed *here* he was going to die.

His mobility was screwed, he had no surprise and no momentum, didn't have the positioning for most gadgets, so the best things left in his arsenal were bad ideas.

Thankfully, Tim always had more of those.

From his incredibly awkward position hanging off the side of a warehouse, Tim twisted and jumped for his dangling grapple. It was the closest thing he had to a gun, after all, if he could unhook it and give its internal motor the time to wind it all the way back up. A partial wind was fine for travel but the real *oomph* was in the full length.

He only just caught the handle, stretching high for it, and the change in momentum wrenched at his shoulder, but he was moving. The release switch was easy to hit by design, and then he was dropping down out of his upwards arc much faster than he was comfortable with.

Not that anything was comfortable right now.

Rather than wait for that wind up, Tim whipped the cable to loop around the corner of the building and then he stretched *again* to catch the falling end. Just about every muscle he had hated him for it, but he was able to use the loop to swing around and then he was clinging one-handed to a whole new side of the building.

Progress, maybe.

At the very least Lawton was going to have to run over here to get a shot off.

Rapid climbing was the last thing Tim wanted to be doing, but it was also the only thing he *could* do right now, so Tim tugged the cable loose, stuck his grapple between his teeth, and clawed his way up the wall.

And then, inches from the top, his head just under the lip of the building, Tim waited.

It didn't take long. Lawton didn't seem to be interested in stealth at the moment, steps crunching across gravel, stopping a couple of feet away, presumably happy to wait for Tim to make an ass of himself again.

“Look kid, it’s been fun but how about you cut this out and come out here. You’ll die quick and I’ll get paid; a win-win. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

Lawton had some of the best eyes and reflexes in the non-meta game, which meant to pull a fast one on him he quite literally couldn’t be allowed to see it coming. At least Tim knew a frankly invasive amount of personal information to level the playing field.

The trick was in the angles, in the lines of motion.

As quiet as could be, Tim switched his grip to one hand and used his other and his mouth to pull lose an extra several feet of cable. Next he made a hitch, careful to leave himself a decent length as well, and then it was show time.

Tim snapped his stabilizing hand higher, over the edge and into Deadshot’s line of sight, counting on his preference for a kill shot over just maiming him off the side of a building, and with his other he threw his makeshift lasso back around the corner. He caught the rest of the line, swinging it up and around and-

“What the fuck?”

Gotcha.

Before Lawton could remove the *definitely innocuous* ring of cable from around his neck, five feet and one inch off the ground when he was standing upright but actually closer to four-eleven when he was braced with his cannons, Tim pulled nearly hard enough to dislodge himself, *dragging* Lawton towards the edge and the not insignificant fall it represented.

There probably would have been more shouting, but Tim wasn't exactly giving Lawton a lot of room to breathe, let alone yell. As it was, he needed to make the most of this before Lawton's instincts took over again and he just shot through the cable.

One-handed, Tim pulled himself back onto the rooftop and despite the blood slicking down his side, he closed the barest distance and hit *hard*.

A kick to turn Deadshot's stumble into a fall, a step inside the resulting flail and past the first cannon, and then Tim cracked an elbow into the hinge of his jaw.

Maybe a bad call in that it made conversation for the next little while impossible, but the disorientation ought to fuck up his aim as well and that was all Tim really wanted. With any luck, it was enough to make his point.

Now he could run.

Except when he turned around, there was a very distinctive shadow

already looming and eliminating half his possible exits with his presence alone.

“Oh fuck.”

He had called, and Batman had answered.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh boy. This chapter was a lot. Like every scene was a lot. I like how things turned out here but fucking heck. This is, of course, unedited at quite early in the morning because idk if I can stare at it anymore right now but I will likely return to at least check things do in fact make sense some time tomorrow. I might also be switching the formatting of the whole fic lol because I've read some stuff recently with smaller spaces between paragraphs and I actually kind of dig it. We'll see.

On the plot! Tim is,,,, Experiencing a wide range of things right now but he's also doing everything in his power to not have to deal with those feelings. Its a real balancing act but unfortunately for our boy he's finally realizing he can't keep it up forever. Bruce is genuinely so worried for this fucking kid and to be fair Tim definitely needs some people to be worried about him. I did not initially intend to fear gas Hellfern, but when I was thinking through ways to get him to talk the irony was simply too sweet.

This chapter is out early in no small part due to all of the absolutely wonderful comments you guys have been leaving. Seriously, some of you guys just got the creative Need To Write machine going and I simply had no choice. Thank you all so much <333 tho I imagine next chapter will probably be more like the now standard month away just due to the amount of Logistics I'll need to puzzle through. Thanks for reading and I hope you have a great day!!

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the moment of quiet that followed, Tim tried to figure out exactly how fucked he was. It didn't look good.

Deadshot was recovering at Tim's feet, discombobulated but otherwise largely unharmed and likely ready to be a threat again in thirty seconds or less. Tim had just climbed up the side of the building *twice* and the chances of Batman having missed both were basically zero. He had called Matches using his normal voice and if that wasn't enough to give him away, he's said exactly the same thing with exactly the same intonation in response to being shot at and to Batman's appearance. He was wearing a *mask*.

The moment of wide-eyed hesitation cost him the initiative and any chance to take control of the situation.

Still, Bruce always managed to surprise him.

"You robbed the Iceberg Lounge."

Tim blinked. Of all the points to focus on, why was that what Bruce jumped to? Sure it was true, but there had to be better questions to start with. Except. Bruce couldn't actually ask all his questions, could he? As long as Deadshot was here, they couldn't speak plainly and even if he wasn't, Bruce likely couldn't be entirely sure what Tim did

and did not know. Yet, anyways.

If Tim was careful, he could delay Bruce realizing just how much he knew a little longer. Maybe. All he had to do was avoid saying anything *too* incriminating. Best to redirect.

He shrugged. “Got any gauze in that belt of yours?” Hopefully Bruce wouldn’t be suspicious enough to deny him medical aid and with any luck if he was looking at the blood he wouldn’t be looking at everything else that was deeply weird and sketchy about Tim.

As if Batman wasn’t one of the best multitaskers on the planet.

Silently, Batman pulled a small wrapped package from his belt and tossed it to Tim who caught it and opened it. A field kit; gauze, antiseptic spray, gloves, and butterfly bandages. Not a ton, but it was a start and more than Tim had any right to besides. He had a basic suture set on him anyways, though he’d sort of been hoping not to need it just yet. Still, the gash in his side wasn’t going away on its own, so Tim nodded his thanks and tucked the kit away, splitting the remains of his attention between Bruce and Lawton.

At Tim’s feet, Lawton was recovering, shaking his head a little but pointedly keeping his attention on Batman and, less subtly than he probably thought he was being, gathering his feet underneath him. It was faster than Tim would have liked too,so he looped the cable around his hand again and pulled at a sharp angle, using it like a morally dubious leash that really ought to be taken off the market before someone seriously hurt their dog with it. But Tim’s was custom-made and he only ever hurt animals that were actively trying to maul him.

Deadshot probably counted as at least a little rabid here and now.

Still, the effort wasn't doing his achy breaky everything any favours and he'd really *really* prefer to stop bleeding in front of Batman.

So. A gamble.

"If I give this to you, you promise not to let him shoot us while I patch up?" Tim hefted the cable as he spoke, knowing full well that for better or for worse Bruce wasn't going to let Lawton get away. Tim might be an unknown, but only an idiot would discount Deadshot with a target.

There was a beat where Tim thought that Batman would demand more information first, use his help as a bargaining tool until Tim *couldn't* hold Lawton on his own anymore. It would have been fair. That was how Batman usually treated criminals, after all.

And Tim was a criminal, no two ways about it.

But then, finally, Bruce moved and it wasn't the kind of sharp movements that preluded violence. It was just an approach. A little careful in a way that reminded Tim of the Batcave's medbay, like Bruce wasn't quite sure whether his presence would help or just make things worse but he couldn't bring himself to *leave.* For all that it was

familiar, it also made Tim feel a little like he was losing his mind. He wasn't *allowed* this right now. Not if he wanted the people he loved to one day love him back. Not if he wanted them to *be* the people he had loved. Tim could have all the help he wanted right here, right now, and all it would cost was the future and world he had worked so hard for. All it would cost was everything he had ever cared about.

Tim couldn't bring himself to be that selfish. Could barely look at the thought straight on without tearing up.

But more importantly, Tim had places to be.

Namely, basically anywhere other than where he was standing right now.Preferably Leslie's clinic, but Tim would be more than happy to compromise with a dumpster on the other side of town.

It was a weakness to imagine heat leaking through the glove that gently pushed him aside as Batman ignored the cable and pulled a set of definitely-not-patented batcuffs from his belt. In contrast, it was a team effort from Tim's common sense and paranoia that had him skittering backwards and out of convenient cuffing range and then back another three feet to a corner of the rooftop before he gave even a scrap of his attention to his injuries. Just to be on the safe side.

The graze was pretty gnarly, at least visually. Still stung, still bled even if the edges were raw with half-crystallized blood, and still restricted his range of movement. Stitches wouldn't help with two out of the three, but one wasn't bad given the circumstances. Cleaning it was the work of a few painful seconds, and then Tim was trying to thread a needle. The minute shake of his hands was making it difficult, but Tim *had* this dammit.

He had this.

“What are you doing here?”

Tim nearly jumped out of his skin despite himself, only his hard-earned reflex to freeze at Batman’s voice stopped him from dropping the needle entirely. How to spin this? Assuming Bruce knew everything was an obvious mistake, but it would be equally stupid to assume he was still in the dark about Tim’s extracurriculars. But still. Never confess to a crime you haven’t been accused of.

Maybe Tim could pretend he thought the question was for Deadshot.

It obviously wasn’t; the tone just a touch too soft and it was all too obvious what Lawton was here for. He wasn’t exactly the type to get out of bed for a friendly game of rooftop tag-with-bullets without a paycheck of some kind. If Bruce was talking to Deadshot, he would have asked who had hired him.

Lawton seemed to agree, at least that the question was stupid. “Came out here for a late night picnic, what do you fucking think Bats?”

“What are you doing here?” This time the question came with an edge. Not a threat, yet, but there was something hard in it, a pry bar set on a table. Tim wasn’t a fan of suddenly feeling like a suspicious crate. For all that Batman was half-pinning Deadshot in place, his

attention was clearly on Tim. On his hands.

Bruce had to know ‘Alvin’ was the very obvious vigilante on the roof, so why did he want Tim to incriminate himself? And where was Robin?

The longer he kept his mouth shut the worse it would be. That’s how Bruce-interrogations always went. The best way to mitigate things was always to throw Bruce a puzzle and then sneak out while he was trying to solve it. But Tim had inadvertently made himself the most interesting thing on the rooftop.

Redirecting and hoping for the best it was.

“Trying not to get shot, mostly. Lawton,” he flicked his attention to Deadshot even as he finally tied the knot for his needle. Time for the next painful part. “I’ve got a decent idea about your employer, but how about you look shocked and swear at me when I get it right anyways?”

That got both of their attention which wasn’t really what Tim wanted but it was step one.

“Look you crazy brat, I’m getting paid to put down an up-and-coming gang boss not tangle with fucking capes. Clearly my employer is a moron, and either I need to renegotiate or pass this on to someone without survival instincts,” Lawton spat the words, mask creased with the force of his frustration, but still notably in position to try

something clever the second he had an opening.

Looked like *someone* wasn't interested in a mandatory vacation in Blackgate. Tim could use that.

"You sure you want to go renegotiate with Cobblepot? He's not an idiot and hasn't gotten this far by overpaying. You're basically discount Deathstroke. If you scratch off that discount, he's just going to finish the jump up the price bracket and hire the Terminator." Tim kept his tone casual, stitching as he spoke. If he could get this done, it would make the next part easier.

The accusation was a guess, but one Tim felt pretty good about and one that wouldn't expose more of his shenanigans to Bruce. He had already put the pieces together about Tim's little heist, apparently, so he could have that one for free and Cobblepot *was* the most likely member of the Anti-Alvin Club to hire Deadshot. Luthor would have gone straight for overkill or he would have kept the killer in-house, and anyways Tim had stolen from him ages ago and he had done a good job of not leaving much evidence. Resources, but not enough data and the wrong kind of hitman. The Ibanescus or any of the various crime bosses who Tim had presumably offended by existing might have had the information-Tim's area of operation, what he looked like- but they wouldn't have the resources for a hit like this. Cobblepot though, had seen his face, probably knew exactly what he stole, and with a grudge he'd have his ear to the ground for any shenanigans. He'd be able to get the scoop on Alvin Draper and even if Tim had made a bit of a dent in his funds, Cobblepot was certainly more than capable of hiring Deadshot to reinforce the consequences for attacking *his* stronghold in the city.

So a guess, but one Tim felt pretty good about.

What felt even better was the pause and the indignant cant of Lawton's head. At the very least the insult had landed, but Tim suspected it was a little bit more than that.

"Maybe you *are* just some lucky fucking rookie," Lawton hissed, hands flexing in their cuffs. They were high quality, a sturdy steel composite that would take some serious effort or the key to open. Not that Lawton needed his hands *free* to cause problems. "That's what the contract said, but I thought maybe they got it wrong after all the goddamn acrobatics. Clearly not if you don't know the difference between a hitman and an assassin, Christ."

He didn't even try to deny the Penguin's involvement, Tim noted. That was as good as confirmation and was in all likelihood something he was going to have to deal with sooner rather than later. But first-

"Hey Batman," Tim said like the familiar words weren't ashes in his mouth. He had most of his side stitched, but in order to get the last inch or so he'd need to twist in a way that would risk popping the rest of his sutures. He *could* do it himself, but if there was a helping hand nearby, well. Tim was a busy guy and he only had so many stones for all these birds. "Can you get the last few? I can't reach."

Yet another pause, and Tim could practically see Bruce rewinding his words to look at them from every angle, looking for a catch or some clue as to where this was coming from. But he had set the bait, and there weren't a lot of traps Batman wasn't willing to spring in order to help someone who asked.

With a sharp kick to the leg Lawton had most of his weight settled on, no snap of bone but definitely a nasty bruise, Batman approached and Tim did his best to breathe evenly. The pain helped.

At least until there was the familiar pressure of Bruce's gloves for the second time in as many minutes, at which point it was all Tim could do to blink back the tears that threatened to blind him and ruin everything.

And then Batman *shushed* him. It was barely a sound, a soft slide of absent-minded air through teeth, but it cut like a knife. Tim clenched his eyes shut behind his mask, and god Bruce couldn't even *see* his eyes but he still knew, how did he always *know*?

It was for the best that Bruce took the needle because otherwise Tim would have dropped it. He clenched his fists to keep from doing something unforgivable, like reach out.

"You've done this before." The words were quiet, private, probably not something Deadshot could hear from the other side of the roof, and they burrowed deep into Tim's chest like they were looking for a place to live.

Tim choked out a laugh, more a huff than anything else because he couldn't afford to move too much, and bitter besides, but a laugh all the same. "Couple times, yeah. I'm probably not going to stop any time soon."

That was, actually, hopefully a bit of a lie. If Tim got picked back up for the future tomorrow, from Bruce's perspective it would be years before he ran into Tim again. Of course from *Tim's* perspective it was nothing but the truth. Sure he could stop being a vigilante, but at the end of the day Tim wanted to help people. There were lots of ways to help people, and Tim planned on spending the rest of his life pursuing as many of them as he could cram into his schedule.

"That doesn't mean you have to be alone." And *fuck*. This was the Batman that Tim had put his faith in as a kid. The steady kindness, the flash of kevlar in the dark, the assurance that *it was going to be okay*.

The minor evil of the point passing through his flesh was one Tim was happy to shoulder if it made a difference. The major evil of Deadshot lurching to his feet and aiming his bound hands at Batman's back was a different story.

It was also exactly what Tim had been hoping for.

Tim gave in to the sad, desperate thing in his chest and placed a hand on Bruce's shoulder. The slide of the cape, the bulk of the armour, the *shape* of the man were so, so familiar. His words were thick and wet but he needed to say them, needed Bruce to hear them. "Maybe not always, but today it does. I'm sorry."

And then he shoved Bruce off one side of the building and dove off the other.

This had better be the last time he had to jump off this fucking roof.

Five, ten, fifteen feet flashed by before Tim caught an exhaust pipe that held him for all of three seconds before cracking open with a groan and then he was falling again. This time he caught a toehold on the brick and push off and away, falling in an arc instead of straight down and managing to crash into a flickering lamp post about half of the way up it. He'd take what he could get.

Doing his best not to let the needle still hanging from his side catch on anything, Tim shimmied to the ground, already trying to figure out how he was going to outrun Batman. If he needed to. Again, Bruce was unlikely to abandon Lawton on the roof and he *did* know at least in theory that Hellfern was somewhere around here and both a criminal *and* seriously injured. Maybe he'd decide to stay to deal with them.

But just in case, Tim needed a better exit strategy than impromptu urban cliff-jumping.

For whatever reason, Tim couldn't see Lawton at the edge of the building. Maybe he was on Batman's side, or maybe he was focusing on getting his hands free. Either way, it gave Tim a little more time than he'd really been expecting to have. Now all he had to do was get out of here.

Tim quickly tied off the thread and tucked away the hooked needle, doing his best to tug the torn edges of his tunic over the injury. He'd wrap it properly when he got the chance.

And maybe someone somewhere was trying to apologize for his absolutely *ass* day, because there, just on the other side of the street, was an unattended batmobile.

He shouldn't.

It was a terrible idea, and would definitely have a tracker, and could only be taken as antagonism.

He *shouldn't*.

--

This wasn't Tim's first time behind the wheel of a batmobile, but it also wasn't something he got to very often. Which was maybe for the best because the last one he'd been in had had several years of upgrades on this one.

The model was old enough it didn't have a robust autopilot system, and as always none of the buttons were labelled, but Tim was familiar enough with the emergency start system since that had apparently been a staple since the very first batmobile. It made sense; no one wanted to be trying to remember which secret lever bypassed the ignition when Bane was running at them. It was also more levers and switches than buttons, more analogue than digital which, while less cool, was probably a good call in the days when a backup generator

would be almost half the size of the engine.

Still, there was something about the familiar handling and the sweet purr of the engine. Tim had missed it. He would soak it in while he had the chance.

Which wouldn't actually be long, mind, because this thing was definitely telling Batman exactly where he was and he was honestly surprised he hadn't gotten some sort of call over the car's phone or mobile comm yet. Bruce could probably give it a ring, and even Alfred would probably want to know what, exactly, the fuck was going on, and of course there was-

"You! Who the heck even are you and what have you done with Batman?"

The Boy Wonder. Fucking hell.

Tim took a guess at the talk button, only to turn on the high beams, and then another which seemed to activate the passenger seat warmer, and it was on his third try that he got the *hiss - click* of an opening line.

"Batman is fine, I promise. I just needed to get out of there and I didn't want him to follow me so I made it a little trickier to do that." Tim aimed for reassuring but was pretty sure he only narrowly avoided sounding patronizing. He wouldn't have taken a stranger's word for any of this when *he* had been Robin, after all.

“You’re going to regret this- I’m going to take you *down*,” Robin promised darkly and jeez. Tim had stolen a car it wasn’t like he’d *killed* anybody. Calm down, kid.

Not likely, but Tim tried anyways. “Look, I am literally going to pull over in like, a block. You can come pick up the car if you want, Batman might need it to transport the two criminals he’s got back there to somewhere secure.”

“Three.”

“What?” Tim was, admittedly, only paying half of the attention he should have been to the conversation, too busy trying to figure out where he was going to park this thing without risking it getting vandalized now that he was finally most of the way out of the industrial district.

“There are *three* criminals Batman is going to need to transport tonight.” Robin’s voice was low and hard, even through the imperfect phone line, and then there was a *thud* as something landed on the roof of the car.

Tim killed his first instinct, to swerve and throw the attacker off the vehicle, but that left him with the very real problem of a Boy Wonder on his windshield. He was having way too many Gotham Goon experiences these days for his peace of mind.

Now theoretically, if this was a batmobile from *Tim's* time he'd be able to deploy a couple of non-lethal defenses and at least get the kid off the car, but as things stood Tim couldn't be sure what was meant to deter looters and what was to get through a riot. So he was going to have to handle this old-school.

There was also the question of how Robin planned on getting *in* to the car from the outside, but the fact he was doing this at all suggested he had some kind of direction here. Which was concerning. Dick with a plan wasn't Tim's idea of a fun enemy.

Best not to find out what that plan was.

The sound of movement above was bad for Tim's already shot nerves, and it was only by virtue of Bruce's very aggressive 'defensive driving' lessons that when Tim hit the brake it was a smooth tap rather than a stomp. Just enough to make this next bit feasible, and then he pulled the car out of gear. There was one other feature of every batmobile that had been the same since its first iteration.

The emergency ejection.

What was it he had been thinking about exit strategies earlier? Because this was definitely going to be less fun than jumping off a building.

Tim just hoped Robin didn't land *too* badly.

More noise, this time closer to the front of the car, and it was now or never so Tim let his hand slip to the bottom of the steering wheel and thumbed the tiny switch carefully hidden on the inside just out of reach of where a driver's hand would naturally rest.

And then the phone *rang*.

In a world where Tim made smarter decisions, he would have ignored and ejected anyways. He had no business answering a bat-phone, and since it was probably Alfred surely he'd just use the comms when this call didn't go through. It might be important, but it definitely was not the kind of thing Tim should be sticking his nose into.

Tim answered the phone.

He also put the car back into gear, reverse now, since Tim was *not* enjoying the gentle sound of metal-on-metal from the outside of the car. The engine wasn't be happy about that, but it wasn't like Tim was going to be the one running maintenance on it later and at least this way he wouldn't be juggling the phone and the gear shift.

Immediately, the line filled with a thick, scrambled voice. "Riddle me thi-"

“Yello?” Let it never be said Tim needed more than one word to confuse a person.

“..what.” The audio was still distorted, which was a shame because Eddie always had a funny response to not knowing something. Still, he was probably calling for a reason and while Tim had full faith in adult Dick’s ability to deal with the Riddler’s bullshit puzzles, he wasn’t entirely sure at what point in his training he’d gone from letting Batman take point on these kinds of things to handling them himself. And Tim *had* had kind of a rough night.

Maybe fucking around with Nygma could be fun.

“You know, the phone greeting?” Tim said with all the youthful derision he could muster as he picked up speed now heading backwards. “Cross between ‘yes’ and ‘hello’ meant to indicate the caller should state their business? Yello?”

There was another pause and Tim took the opportunity to jerk the wheel and pull the handbrake, swinging the batmobile’s nose around in a sharp one hundred and eighty degree turn, only to immediately start heading back the other way. Batmobiles didn’t, by design, have a lot of good handholds on the outside, and that kind of whiplash first one direction and the other would dislodge pretty much anything short of someone who had pierced the armoured body.

“... Robin?” Even through the distortion, it was clearly a question.

The noise on top of the car had stopped, but Tim wasn't dumb enough to think he was safe. At best Robin was off the car and in position to try something else clever and inconvenient, and at worst he was still there and only pretending to be gone.

"No, I'm just some guy doing something I'm not supposed to right now, but I love a good logic puzzle. What've you got?" It might end up being something Tim had heard before, or from a case he'd read the file on, but if he was lucky it'd be something unfamiliar and he could just unwind and *think* his way through it.

That seemed to be enough for Eddie to rally, but he was clearly off his rhythm. "Riddle me this, *freelancer,* I am a staple of a city and I am built to fail. My bones are unbound but when they come apart they wail. I am made of and home in snig and puppy dog tail. If you manage not to kick the can, you may just prevail."

Fucking hell. Apparently Nygma had yet to master the more poetic aspects of riddle making like meter. At least it was coherent and thematically consistent.

It was also a cue for Tim to get out of the stolen vehicle because it wasn't like he needed to be driving to think. Tim always did his best thinking quite literally on his feet.

"Alright Eddie, I'll see you in a bit. Give or take an hour depending on how long it takes me to ditch the Bats on my tail. Leave any soda on ice, okay?" Tim didn't wait for a response before hanging up. Now all he had to do was get away from the just-shy-of-homicidal teenager.

That was easier said than done.

Tim wasn't looking to reinvent the wheel, just leave the immediate vicinity, so he figured sticking with his earlier plan of eject and hope Robin pursued the car and not the person was straightforward enough to stick with. He was, admittedly, not convinced but the longer he stayed in the car the longer Robin would have to set a trap. May as well get it over with.

He was also still thinking about the riddle. It was several clues threaded together, but how many things was it referring to? Presumably, since this was all Tim had to work with, it described both the scheme and its location.

Rather than launch himself into the unknown at top backwards speed, which in the batmobile was actually a rather respectable twenty miles per hour, Tim dropped back into neutral and took a second to tape some of Batman's gauze over his graze. It was far from perfect or even a standard field dressing, but as long as he stayed dry it would do the trick until he could get to Leslie's. Hopefully.

The first part of the riddle clearly referred to some kind of construction project, except one that wasn't meant to last. This was further supported by the second line, and presumably the reference to wailing and the following line were supposed to say what kind of project it was. But what the hell was a snig, and why did it sound familiar in conjunction with 'puppy dog tail'?

It was time to get this show on the road.

Tim didn't hesitate, flicking the eject switch and bracing himself for the rush of wind and the high of an uncontrolled launch.

What he hadn't braced for, was to almost immediately smack into a teenager who was, in fact, still clinging to the outside of the batmobile and apparently tinkering with some of the car's wiring. Fuck if Tim knew how, though from the very sudden but shallow sharp pain in his arms Dick must have used something to pierce the body of the car and hold on.

But the eject packed a fair amount of punch, enough to dislodge Dick who was solid enough to absolutely *ruin* the intended trajectory and with the car still moving beneath them, they both crashed into the pavement in a heap of winded limbs. Not an unfamiliar position, but normally one with a version of Dick less intent on maiming him.

It was while unpleasantly close and personal with a violent child hissing frankly hypocritical things about his chosen hobby, that Tim was abruptly reminded of a nursery rhyme; *snips and snails and puppy dog tails*. He'd done a project on it in the tenth grade, researching its history and when it fell out of common use, and one of the things he'd learned was that the first word in the sequence varied. Sometimes it was *snakes*, sometimes it was *snips*, and even more rarely it was *snigs;* an archaic word for a small eel.

Of course, the rhyme was describing what little boys were made of. And why would a structure wail while it came apart? Because it was made of *children*.

His conclusions in the last fight he had with Robin also held true; being in close and personal with Robin was a *terrible* idea. Tim had some height and muscle on him for basically the first time in forever, but grappling with someone with near-contortionist levels of flexibility was a nightmare. Every hold, every throw, and Robin just *oozed* out of it and tried to punch him in the face or stab him with various gadgets that Tim had to keep breaking against the pavement or smacking out of reach. It was exhausting. Tim's face was starting to hurt.

And Tim was already pretty fucking tired. He just wanted to solve a riddle and go check on his kid.

Somewhere there was something built of children that was meant to collapse, and Tim was wrestling with his brother who didn't know or care about him. So maybe it was a little rude and definitely pretty juvenile, but Tim decided to hell with standard techniques and just twisted his way past another jabbing elbow and on top of Robin- the Boy Wonder wasn't the *only* one who was weirdly flexible thank you very much- and before he could wriggle out of it, Tim went limp.

Robin *eep'd* and choked out a predictable "What have you been *eating*?" as Tim's full weight dropped on him and Tim took the opportunity to jab him with a couple of quick nerve strikes, immobilizing his arms and reducing his range of motion on his left side.

Tim was *notably unhappy* about what he'd figured out thus far, but he still needed to know exactly *where* he was going to be breaking Nygma's face in the next hour or so. There wasn't a lot of riddle left to work with. The last line seemed like a waste, just a vague threat, but what if it wasn't? And what was their left to work with in the other lines?

Well for one, the nursery rhyme was incomplete.

Now that Robin was less slippery, Tim was finally able to put some distance between them again, and as the Boy Wonder awkwardly leapt to his feet, Tim considered how he actually wanted this fight to end. Ideally they'd just stop fighting and split, but that clearly wasn't happening any time soon. So how could he stop Robin from harassing him 'til the Bat came home?

The answer was time out.

The question was what exactly did snails and cans have to do with each other?

If resorting to literally throwing his weight around was a little rude, then the next thing Tim did was an outright dick move. Dick was still mobile and dangerous, but he was also overcompensating for his limited options with aggression, chaining together enough flips and kicks for a full tumbling routine, and that made him easy to lead towards the now-stopped batmobile until Tim was all but pressed to the passenger door.

For all that Tim hadn't let himself be pushed around, Robin still had the disadvantage that he didn't actually know what Tim could do. It wasn't a truth Tim wanted to give up, but there were already so many cats trying to escape so many bags that it wasn't worth wasting time to defend this one secret.

"You can't do this forever," Robin chirped, which was rude but true. Tim was out of breath and his side burned. "And Batman's on his way, so how about you be a good little criminal and *stay still*."

Not likely. Tim would have responded but most of his focus and all of his oxygen was directed to not getting concussed.

At the next kick aimed for Tim's throat, he pretended to slip, catching himself on one of the gouges Robin had left in the side of the car with one hand and with the other popping the latch on the door. The move left Tim half crouched and in an awkward position and if this didn't work he was in serious trouble. Robin pressed the attack, cutting in closer to drive a knee at Tim's gut that he narrowly avoided and then stomping downwards on Tim's thigh when it missed.

Tim's leg nearly buckled at the blow, that steel heel a real motherfucker to be on the receiving end of, but he let his weight roll with the motion, using the momentum to drive his left shoulder into Robin and shove him back enough to pop the door open. Then he continued the spin, door to his back and keeping too close for Robin to effectively kick him though the kid made a good effort to headbutt him, until Robin was between him and the car.

Before Robin could take a step back on his own or try and flip up onto the car's roof, Tim dropped his shoulder again and fell into a low, wide stance, wrapping one arm around Dick's waist and pulling his leg up and forward with the other to bodily scoop the Boy Wonder and drop his ass in the passenger seat of the batmobile.

Tim retreated, trying not to catch another foot to the face, and closed the door with a rather final *click*.

The car wasn’t locked, but the older design meant analogue doors. Analogue doors that would be incredibly difficult to open without the ability to grasp objects and combat-grade pixie boots on. Not a permanent solution, but a Robin-in-a-can would do to buy Tim time to escape.

Wait. Robin in a can.

Just about anything could be canned if you had the facilities for it.

Was there a snail cannery in Gotham?

Chapter End Notes

Howdy! This chapter marks me as a liar in two respects! Firstly I said it'd be a month but because of the way chips fell I managed to get this done in just under a month. And secondly, when someone in the comments asked how much more I expected to write for this fic I said two chapters and an epilogue, but with this done I Still need two chapters and an epilogue for pacing reasons so! Whoops!!

This chapter ended up winding and doing some interesting internal things and I just hit a natural stopping point where I *could* have kept going but it really would have made this a monstrosity of a chapter. Instead, we get this fun little chapter full of clever things and also me continuing to squint at Dick every time I have to write him. I wanted to give him more fun quips but he was kind of just pissed and there wasn't much to riff off in terms of humour unfortunately. At least Bruce continues to flow in the most uncomfortable way possible. Small victories.

Part of why this chapter is done early is because I'm about to get kinda busy and wasn't sure when I'd work on it other than this last week so we'll see what kind of impact that has on the next one. Fingers crossed its still fine. Thank you again to everyone who was kind enough to leave a comment, every single one sparks joy and I really do like hearing what you guys get from this story! I hope you all have a good week, and an excellent spooky season to come <3

Edit: Hey guys, this is just a heads-up for anyone starting to look since we're coming up on when I normally update; I've thought about it and I've decided I'm going to finish the last two chapters before posting anything. I need to figure out some structure stuff I can't do without actually Writing the ending, so I'm just gonna do that and then I'll post the chapters one and then the other with a week gap once I'm done. The epilogue'll wait, but I think the only way to get these last sections right is to write them together. So apologies for the probable delay!

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was, in fact, a snail cannery in Gotham. It wasn't even that far away, all things considered, which was for the best since Tim had ditched his grapple with Bruce, the batmobile with Robin, and the industrial district at this hour only had big transport trucks around to steal and he wasn't *really* looking to walk halfway across the city.

He'd had to go old-school to find the damn thing, breaking into yet another warehouse to borrow their phone book. The address hadn't been under 'S' for snail *or* 'C' for cannery, instead listed as the *Upscale Wholesale Snail Cannery*. Fucking '*U*'.

Presumably this was where all the mid-tier restaurants in the city trying to pass themselves off as fine dining sourced their snails.

More importantly though, Tim was fairly confident it was where the Riddler had holed up with whatever child-and-construction related scheme he had going at the moment.

It wasn't all that impressive to look at, which was pretty standard in Tim's experience for canneries, but it was a decent sized building and probably had some floor level partitions and an office that could be hiding nasty surprises. At this point in the night, Tim was *not* interested in anything surprising whatsoever. He wanted a fun little brain teaser and to help whatever kids had gotten caught up in this, and to go *home*.

And also possibly to see Nygma's gobsmacked expression in person this time.

What could he say, he'd missed one upping the guy determined to be the smartest guy in every room he walked into, by whatever means and nonsensical plans necessary. It was definitely a better hobby than half of what plenty of vigilantes got up to in their free time.

Now the question was, what were Tim's options for his entry strategy? Generally for a Riddler situation it was best to try and disrupt whatever his game plan was as soon as possible, which tended to rule rooftop entries out since that was basically a Bat-staple. But as far as Eddie new right now, Tim *wasn't* a Bat, so maybe it would end up being a surprise and would give Tim an edge. On the other hand, whatever this trap was, it had been designed for Batman, and while Eddie knew it wasn't Batman on the way that didn't automatically mean he'd disassembled whatever complicated nonsense he'd placed by the rooftop entries to discourage wayward vigilantes.

On the other *other* hand-

Stop. Tim cut himself off before he could keep spiralling. He could speculate back and forth about what Nygma might have set up until sunrise if he wanted, but it wouldn't change what he *did* know. There were kids in there. He needed to get them out. The call seemed pretty spontaneous, which meant the Riddler had probably gotten bored and was looking for a challenge and to put on a show.

Tim could give him that.

So the front door it was, since that would be guaranteed to give him whatever was the intended view of the scene. It was also probably a good idea to not let on this early what exactly Tim's skill set was. Sure the whole batmobile theft thing sort of spoke for itself, but that didn't mean Tim had to make the rest of the Career Vigilante conclusions easy to draw. At the very least Eddie was going to have to work for it.

There were big bay doors on the back of the building, and off to one side was the much, *much* smaller door for actual people rather than trucks. More interesting than its size, was the giant green question mark painted on the metal.

Nygma never had been known for subtlety. Not that Tim was going to be particularly subtle today either.

The door wasn't quiet on its hinges, but any concern about the noise was immediately drowned out by the blinding spotlights aimed right at the entrance. Tim's domino soaked up a little of it, but his lenses were only really designed to reduce glare and this was a little more than a reflection off a skyscraper. It was all Tim could do to try and blink away the spots and squint into the darkness.

"Good evening, little freelancer!" And there was Nygma's voice, loud and only a little crackly through speakers that were presumably hung close enough to the lights Tim couldn't quite pick them out. Sounded like he was in for a monologue, though he hoped that stupid nickname wasn't going to stick. "Clearly you've dressed for the occasion, with the mask and blood-stained jacket. I wasn't sure what to think when you answered the phone, to be honest, but now I can see that you're an up-and-coming fish trying to make it in our big, bad pond. But! The question remains - do you have what it takes?"

Did... Did Eddie thing Tim was a prospective supervillain? Sure the mask and the blood and the stealing from Batman were kind of suspect, but the blood was Tim's and he was *here* wasn't he? Here to disrupt whatever scheme Nygma had going on. That had to count for something on the morality scale, right?

Apparently not. "I doubt it, not many can keep up with the pros here in Gotham, and *no one* has what it takes to figure out *my* puzzles. Oh there's Batman, but he cheats, I know he does, so he doesn't count. Still, maybe I should do us all a favour and show you just how out of your league you are."

As if.

Still, that seemed to be the cue for the spotlights to swing off of Tim and dart towards the centre of the cannery floor. Tim wondered whether there were henchmen up in the rafters moving them and whether they'd had to practice the maneuver, since it wasn't like automated lights were really a thing these days, unless Eddie had made some custom specifically for the sake of dramatics which was always-

What the hell.

In the middle of the cannery, standing a good twelve feet tall and looking entirely out of place, was an enormous jenga tower.

“Say hello, kids.” *What.*

And then the *voices* started, tiny, high voices from *inside the boxes*.

“Hello? Is someone out there?”

“I can’t move! Why can’t I move?”

“Help! Please, whoever you are, help!”

Tim had known, on the way here, that he was going to be dealing with kids in danger. That wasn’t new in his line of work, even if it wasn’t fun, but it was always different to come face to face with kids *begging* for him to do something.

Maybe Tim was going to have to hurt a little more than Nygma’s pride tonight.

Just when he thought it couldn’t get any worse, someone else cried out. Someone familiar. “I don’t feel so good, something’s wrong.”

Luke.

For a second, Tim couldn't breathe past the rage locked around his chest like a vice. He wanted to shout, he wanted to lash out, he wanted to tear this abominable *insult* of a tower down and get his fucking kid out and away from this place.

Patience. Eddie wasn't going to come out from wherever his stupid hiding spot was until he realized he was losing, and maybe not then either.

Kids first, and then Tim could go from there.

"Hey," Tim called trying to find a midpoint between gentle and audible. He settled for the tone and volume he generally used during big crises to try and get civilians off the streets. "Hey kids, I'm here to get you out of there. I'm a friend, I promise. Just give me some time and it's going to be okay."

"Oooh, that's a bad sign. Sure you're clever enough to get here, but by the sound of it, you're too soft for this line of work. Can't go walking around with a big child-shaped vulnerability if you want to get anywhere in Gotham." Nygma's voice tended to be annoying on a good day. Today was not a good day.

"Alvin?" Fuck. So much for the mask giving him at least a little anonymity. But Tim couldn't blame Luke, he was obviously scared and anxious, probably latching on to the only familiar thing around. Just

sucked that it was at the expense of Tim getting away with that little bit more he was hoping for.

It'd be fine. Tim would make sure of it.

"Yeah, chipmunk. I've got you," Tim did his best to keep his tone even, but it was like trying to talk around a battery. Tingly, awkward, and all he wanted to do was spit. "Try to stay calm, it'll be over soon."

Then he turned his attention to the structure itself, tuning out the horror of it and focus on the reality. He had to get these kids out without knocking the structure over, presumably by disassembling the tower. It wouldn't be that simple, these things never were with the Riddler, but that was the goal and if Tim could keep it in mind he'd be able to cut past Nygma's obfuscation and tricks. Which was good, because he couldn't see any yet and that was generally a bad sign.

The boxes seemed simple enough, cheap and poorly machined metal riveted together. Maybe they could be filled with poison to kill the kids if he didn't play nice? Maybe they already were, in some sort of fucked up Schrodinger's child joke. Was there any padding inside, or would the kids be bashing into metal walls if he knocked the tower over?

Nygma wasn't done, either. "The rules are simple, freelancer! The tower currently has a current of one milliamp running through every single box, flowing from the electrified plate beneath the tower's base. For every ninety seconds that pass while you flounder before your betters, I'll be doubling it. Tell me, do you know when it'll start to hurt? When it'll start to kill? Or are electrical physics beyond you, and you're only passable at wordplay?"

That was a trick question. Tim couldn't be sure the age range of the kids in those boxes, and while all kids were more vulnerable to electric shock than adults, it was worse the younger they were. Without a grasp on the age range, Tim would have to assume just about anything over six milliamps was dangerous. That gave him less than five minutes.

Tick tock.

Normally Tim liked to snark back at Eddie, get a little bit of verbal sparring in while he beat him at his own game, but at this point of the night he really couldn't spare the breath for any witty rejoinders. Those would have to wait until the kids were safe.

Speaking of, this was going to be tricky.

In a perfect world, Tim would be able to cast aside all rules of jenga and start at the top, working his way down. That was certainly the method with the best full-time stability. But as things were, Tim couldn't *reach* the top several layers of the tower, and any flips or tricks to get him access would be dangerous for the tower in general and those kids at the top in specific. Twelve feet was a long way to fall when you couldn't do anything to brace yourself.

So Tim was going to have to, at least for a little while, play mostly by the rules here. Didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

“Okay kids,” Tim called, steady but hopefully loud enough they could all hear him. “If I knock on your box, it means I’m going to start moving it. Please do your best to stay still all the time, but *especially* if I’m moving you. I don’t want to drop anyone.”

That was all the warning he could afford to give. He was burning through his timer *way* faster than he was comfortable with. Hopefully the kids listened. This was going to be hard enough without anyone squirming and changing the weight distribution of any of the boxes while he was moving one.

Tim was good, but not *that* good.

So he started simple; knocking on the centre box at his chest level and then *very carefully* pressing on it to slide it a foot forward. From inside the steel trap, Tim heard a little gasp. There was no sound of movement though, and for all that his heart hurt he couldn’t waste any time, so Tim half-jogged around to the other side of the structure and began tugging at the box.

The weight was about what Tim had expected, and the kid did an excellent job of not making his job harder. Based on mass alone, they couldn’t have been older than twelve, accounting for the likelihood these were all street kids and thus probably all at least somewhat underweight.

A glance at the lid told Tim that these things were locked, which was deeply unfortunate because he needed to keep moving and couldn’t stop to open each one. Not great for where he’d been hoping to go

with these things.

Fucking Nygma. He'd really been expecting Batman to show up, huh. Normally the locks would have ended up being Robin's problem while B worked on the tower, but here Tim was all on his lonesome.

It was fine. All he had to do was work fast enough to ensure no one got electrocuted. No biggie.

The next box he went for was the centre of the next level up. Knock-knock, and then again with the pushing and the pulling. One more centre box, this one from just below Tim's waist, and then he could move on to phase two.

He would have felt a lot better about phase two if he'd been able to get the kids out of the boxes first.

"Alright kiddos," Tim said, quieter than before since this was just for the three he had in front of him, and moving even as he spoke. "I can't get these boxes open before the electrics start hurting the others, and I need a boost to reach the top, so I'm going to stack your boxes while I get at some of the kids stuck up top, okay?"

It made Tim feel like an utter bastard, but even if the kids said no he was going to have to do it. He'd be careful, but there wasn't another good way to deal with this given the time limit.

There was a pause, even as Tim carefully positioned the boxes close-to-but-not-touching the tower, two on top of each other and one on its own, and then finally a wet voice spoke. “We’re gonna be okay, though, right? You’re gonna get us out of here?”

At least Tim knew what to say to that. “I’m going to get you all out of here, I promise. Just sit tight.”

And then he was up. Still not high enough to reach the top, and he was going to be committing some OSHA violations by moving heavy objects overhead, but this was definitely better than messing around at the bottom of the tower. He started as high above his head as he dared, still two layers from the top, but it was the best he could do without tearing the graze on his side back open. Tim didn’t have the luxury of knocking this box out of place where he could reach it, but he didn’t have vigilante-tier grip strength for nothing. He gripped the edges as best he could, ignoring the faint tingling pricking at his fingertips.

Tim had to get this done before his hands went numb.

It was worse, tugging overhead and standing on top of two trapped children, a ragged spike of pain shooting through his side, and then he had to pull the box closer, get the weight near enough his body he could actually manoeuvre it, and the *sound* of a little body *thunking* against metal and the following whimper-

It was a lot.

But there wasn't time to feel any of it just yet.

In a careful swing, Tim placed the box on top of the one he had used as the first step, and then the next box he pulled was from lower down, more at his shoulders than his head. That was a little easier, and this one he could actually cradle while stepping backwards and then setting it down on top of the stack closest to the tower.

From inside this box, there was nothing but crying.

Under his breath, limited as it was, Tim started a steady stream of reassurances. It was all he could offer. Two more boxes in height, and he'd be able to start taking this thing apart at the top.

And then, from the fifth level far side, a cry of "*Alvin!"* and a scattering of other voices calling out in pain. The whole structure shuddered, the kids probably flinching involuntarily but finding themselves unable to escape from the pain. Tim had been careful enough they weren't going to be able to bring this thing down like that, but that really wasn't much of an assurance.

Kids were hurting and his time was up.

With this many children, he couldn't even ask for them to call out if they were hurting. Anyone still in the main tower must be

experiencing the increased shock and would need at the very least a checkup from a medical professional after this, but Tim couldn't be sure of anything more than that. The structure had nine layers, meaning twenty-seven kids, and without establishing a system beforehand, that many kids were a *nightmare* to coordinate.

The vice of anger that hadn't let up since hearing Luke's voice tightened, and Tim wanted so badly to take the little brat in his arms and promise that it was going to be alright. Wanted to show Riddler why pulling this bullshit with a bunch of children was a terrible idea. *Slowly*. But he couldn't do that yet, couldn't do it for any of these kids.

All he could do was get them *out*.

And he couldn't do that if he went rage-blind.

Despite the itching in his hands and his heart, Tim did the only thing that would actually help. He swallowed down the sharp anger burning a hole in his mouth, and shouted reassurances, promises, *anything* so they knew they weren't alone even as they were hurting, even as he was moving another box onto the stack behind him.

A step back, another OSHA violation as he stooped and leaned forward awkwardly to reach the next box at about knee height. He was pretty sure he'd popped a stitch or two, but his core took the brunt of the work, shivering with the strain as he pulled the box out of place and set it in front of him.

The extra box gave him the angle he needed to reach dangerously overhead, and yeah he was definitely bleeding again, *joy*. The second he touched the metal, he felt the current biting and gnawing at him, which was all kinds of fun and made getting a good grip an interesting and entirely unwelcome challenge. But it got him what he needed – another box and another foot and a half in height.

No wiggle room to bother with twisting and carefully working his way up, this time Tim just stepped back onto the shorter stack and set the last one in front of him. By now, just about every muscle he had was starting to burn.

Maybe he *had* let his fitness go a little while being stuck in the past.

But he was so close to being done the hard part, then it would be all manual labour and even if it wasn't pleasant, Tim could *do* that relatively quickly. Just a little further.

Another set of shrieks, the whole tower twitching like a living thing, and for a heart-stopping moment Tim thought it was going over, thought all his work had been for nothing, but before he could spiral too far into how best to cushion as many fallen kids as he could, it steadied and Tim let the extra notches of tension dial back to a more manageable level.

And then, from somewhere beneath him, a kid sneezed.

Before Tim could even really react, his own little tower rocked and

shook, tilting one way and then the other, and all Tim could see was what a catastrophe it would be if it hit the main tower and took them both out in one go.

That couldn't happen. Tim couldn't let it.

"Hold on!" It was all the warning he could give, and there was no way it was enough. Tim leaned into the movement, rocking the motion of it out and away, and then, just before things went down entirely, he jumped off the structure, taking the landing in a roll, and then springing back up to *hold* the little tower together.

The tower swayed, Tim's shoulders ached, and the kids in both structures were audibly crying, but neither fell. They didn't fall.

Not yet, at least.

But Tim now had a new conundrum; he couldn't exactly get back to his position to reach the topmost layer of the jenga tower. And he couldn't afford to start from scratch.

So, in the true spirit of jenga, he was going to have to get a little risky.

First things first, reassessment. None of the remaining boxes were going to be easy to move with the current assisting in holding them together, but if he could figure out where the majority of the weight

was resting-

Tim had been pretty methodical up until this point, taking out only the centre boxes to try and keep things as steady as possible for as long as possible, but he'd left the fourth layer entirely alone. It had been mostly an accident, getting too far ahead of himself with reaching higher to fully tidy up the bottom section, but that was to his advantage now.

All he had to do was not fuck this up.

Half certain he was making a mistake and refusing to look in the direction of those thoughts, Tim knocked twice on the box to the right and, before he could lose his nerve, gently pushed it out of place. Tim kept an eye on the rest of the tower; if it started to sway that meant this box was load-bearing and Tim would be, for all intents and purposes, screwed.

The tower held steady.

Tim's hands were tingling and the sensation was spreading all the way to his elbows.

Now on the other side, Tim again tugged the box out of place, being as careful as he could not to make contact with anything whatsoever. When the box finally slid entirely free, the literal physical relief was instant. Sure Tim was holding all the weight now, but the lack of electrical current was nothing to scoff at.

If his internal timer was accurate, Tim was coming up on that third minute. Twelve milliamps wasn't dangerous to an adult, so Tim would probably be fine, but it would be a toss up for the kids.

Going for the other side box wasn't the dumbest thing Tim could possibly do, but it felt pretty close. He was out of options, though, and anything else he could do was going to end with *someone* hurt. Tim had to try.

The box slid out easily enough, and he set it down a good several feet away. If this went south, he hoped the kid in there at least wouldn't get caught up in it.

One deep breath, another for luck, and then Tim knocked on the remaining centre box and the two supporting it in rapid succession. No hesitation. If he was anything less than certain, he'd fail.

Tim snapped a kick right into the middle of the lone box, knocking it out of place and to the floor in a hopefully manageable four-ish foot drop, and as the main body of the tower fell, he swept two sharp kicks into the sides of the supporting boxes, sending them to the floor as well. They landed mere inches from the tower, but without a higher voltage, the odds of any electrical arcs were low, so the kids were as alright as they were going to get.

Even if he had wanted to, there was no way Tim could breath as the top of the tower dropped onto the remaining base.

Another round of cries, some questions but mostly just vocalizations of fear, pain, and surprise, but the tower held.

Before it could change its mind, Tim carefully stacked two of the boxes on top of each other, stepped up, and started pulling from the now much more reachable top of the tower.

His shoulders burned, his arms were numb, and he was pretty sure he'd bled clean through his tunic, but Tim got the whole thing down and *away* from the electrified sheet of metal on the floor before that fifth minute.

It wasn't perfect. He'd would take it anyways.

Tim sat back on his heels, rolling his shoulders in the hope of relieving some of the tension and regaining enough sensation in his hands to start on the locks. Just a moment, until he could-

"Well, well, well! Looks like the little freelancer knows a thing or two about spatial reasoning! Still not the most efficient way to have gone about this whole thing, but I suppose you may have *some* promise after all." The voice was still coming from the speakers, but with the kids out of immediate harm's way, Tim could direct his attention to locating the approximate location of those speakers in the darkness.

Seemed like there were three speakers set up around the space to try and use the cannery's acoustics to create an even wall of sound, but with the jenga tower down, the reverb wasn't quite the same. In this day and age, there was no way the speakers were wireless, and if they all needed to cable to the same place, either they would converge and there ought to be one big bundle to track, *or-*

They'd triangulate and meet in the middle at what, from the vague shadows Tim could make out, appeared to be the foreman's station.

Gotcha .

Now all had to do was keep Nygma in the building for long enough for Tim to get to him. After the rest of his night, that ought to be a piece of cake.

"You know," Tim drawled, rolling the words like they were just coming to him rather than being carefully chosen to piss him off. "After your garbage riddle and this joke of a puzzle, I'm not sure you're the guy I need to impress. Maybe you're smarter than tonight suggests, but how much can your opinion really be worth if this is the best you can do?"

I t would be generous to call the noise that came through the speakers as a shriek. More honestly, it sounded like someone emptying a helium balloon into a kazoo.

"*Joke*? You think it was *easy* to get all those kids in those stupid boxes

and then to stack them so precisely without knocking the whole thing over? We had to use two ladders and a powered lift to position things correctly!" Nygma was incensed, and more importantly Tim had regained enough dexterity to start opening up those 'stupid boxes.'

T he locks weren't anything special, but they'd probably be enough to trip up a civilian and Tim wasn't really interested in triggering any traps, so h e gave them more attention than he normally would have bothered.

Eddie was still going. "This challenge was a reminder of my skill and dedication to the craft, not my magnum opus! It simply wouldn't do to allow Gotham's vigilantes to grow complacent and forget that their betters are still at large."

Tim hadn't allowed himself to focus on the noises the kids had been making for a while, but when that first box popped open and *Luke* launched himself into Tim's shaky arms, every other noise disappeared beneath the sound of Luke's soft sobbing, his ga s ping breaths, the whispered " *Alvin,"* that split his sternum right open. The rest of it didn't matter. His kid was alive, and warm, and right there.

Everything after th is was just icing and sprinkles.

Luke was shaking, and Tim couldn't help pressing a kiss to the top of his head. He didn't shush him, just let him cry. The kid deserved a minute. Tim ought to put him down and get back to work, ought to be paying any kind of attention to Eddie, except he had one of the most important parts of Gotham in his arms. What was the Riddler's ego in the face of that?

But the other kids deserved relief as well. In one quick, careful motion, Tim balanced Luke on his good hip, whispering reassurances under his breath, and then very pointedly *didn't* stagger over to the next box. There was more work to do.

"Are you even *listening* to me?" Yeah Tim had that coming for so blatantly not. He was so ready to be done for the night, even as he helped a third kid out of their box and gently herded them between him and the door.

S till. There had to be *some* consequences to this or Eddie might decided kidnapping children was acceptable behaviour. "I got the gist. And you do have a point. This couldn't have been easy to set up. I know I sure as hell wouldn't bother with something like this just to get some jackass in a fursuit's attention, no matter how smart he was. So maybe I'm not cut out for this gig. I'll just grab these kids and go rethink my life choices, sound good?"

All Tim had to do was get the kids out of here and he'd be good to go.

"You really think I'm stupid enough to believe that's what you're going to do as soon as you leave? No, you'll just turn up again later and ruin another puzzle. Utterly unacceptable. You're going to stay right here until you can admit that you are *outclassed*." Riddler was clearly doing his best to sound condescending rather than furious, but his shouting from the foreman's station was loud enough that with the audio from the speakers at a slight delay, there was a very obvious echo.

B ut Tim had what he wanted, even if it broke his heart a little bit. At leas t with an Eddie this unrefined he shouldn't be stuck here for more than another forty minutes.

"How about this," Tim said it like this was a negotiation and not an incredible waste of his time. If nothing else it bought time while he got worked his way through the locks. Each kid got a hand out, a whispered promise, and a gently nudge towards the rest of them. He couldn't offer them any more just yet. "I get the kids out of here so we can talk like adults, come back, and we go for a couple rounds of Bullshit to see who's better at counting cards and lying. We can leave being clever until some time I'm not bleeding, yeah? Leave a real battle of wits for a day with a fair playing field."

T hat spiel got Tim another three boxes open. He was getting through them fairly quickly, all things considered, but there were *so many* kids here. Fucking Riddler and his commitment to his schemes and their associated gimmick s. Couldn't have filled any of these things with sandbags, of course not. That wouldn't be *genuine* enough.

And he still needed to get these kids medical attention. Riddler probably had a phone, but there was no way he was going to let Tim call an ambulance here. Actually.

Eddie was clearly still mulling over Tim's proposal, so he decided to push his luck.

"C'mon, man. I finish up out here, meet you in your little booth over there and use the phone we both know you've got to call an ambulance to meet the chipmunks here two blocks away, and you can have some time to decide if there's more to me than some clever tricks

and a soft spot for kids." It was a concentrated effort to let the thought hang but not sound like he was trying to coax a cat into a carrier. Eddie had to believe Tim respected him at least a little, or this wouldn't go anywhere.

"I suppose it isn't a *bad* idea to get the props out of here now that I'm done with them," Nygma mused, and Tim wasn't going to give the game away too soon, he was *not* going to give the game away no matter what garbage came out of his mouth- "I could always remove them in a more *permanent* manner of course, since I'm sure they'd be a distraction from our game."

Up, around the facility floor from here those damned lights were hanging, Tim heard the particular clicks of magazines sliding into place. Behind him, someone screamed. At least a good half dozen rifles , all out of reach, all aiming *at his fucking kids* .

Absolutely the fuck not.

Nothing mattered, not the clink of his lock picks in his hands, not the reverb from the speakers still bouncing off the shell of the cannery, not the burning ache in his side, the only thing s left w ere the kids huddled behind him, the ones still in their boxes, and the little boy crying in his arms. He was all they had.

And all *he* had was a bullet-resistant suit, his belts, and whatever tricks he could pull from his jacket's sleeves.

That had always been enough before. It would have to be again.

"Let me be crystal clear," Tim lost all affectation, lost the masks and the games, couldn't keep them up here and now, didn't have the spare bandwidth for any of it. All that was left was the fine edged *purpose* that kept him going at the end of all things, the blade of means and ends that only cared what he wanted and what he was willing to do. The words were the feeling of a bo staff in hand and a line of code tied to explosions across the globe. "If anything happens to these children, we won't be playing anything. I'll break every bone in you skull *individually* and then I'll move on to your vertebrae, top to bottom. Then it'll be your clavicles, your shoulder blades. Then your ribs. Sternum. Pelvis. And once I'm done with your thorax, I'll work my way out into the extremities. Riddle me *this*, Edward, what's better to lose us of tactically speaking – your feet or your hands?"

It was stupid, threatening the man with several automatic rifles aimed at the people he was trying to protect. That thought wasn't real either. The threat was where Tim couldn't touch it and he *burned*.

"Oh *hello*. And who is this?" Nygma sounded delighted, like he'd found an unexpected toy at the bottom of his cereal box despite that practice being discontinued a decade ago. Maybe only a couple of years ago, in this time. "Is this what you've been hiding under all that impudence?"

Fuck.

Fuck, could he spin this? What was he spinning, what was the angle, what did he *want* -

Luke's hand tightened on the collar of Tim's jacket.

A breath, full of steel and sweat and salt. He wanted these kids to make it out of the cannery. He wanted them to get medical attention. He wanted the Riddler to *never* do this again.

Okay. Tim could work with t hose .

"Do you want to find out what I am the way you'll find fun or the way *I'll* find fun, Nygma? 'Cause at this point of the night those are two very different definitions we're operating under." Tim couldn't wrap his tongue around the right drawl, couldn't make his words as casually dangerous as he wanted them to be. This wasn't the shape of a knife under a coat, this was naked steel on skin. Not exactly the best way to appeal to Eddie's ego. He'd make it work.

A laugh, less condescending than the others but not entirely honest either. A second too late, a little too forced. Was Eddie scared? "Here are my terms, freelancer, if you can bear to accept them. I'll call an ambulance for an address I will write on a piece of paper. The brats can take it and go, but you and I are going to have a *conversation* about career paths in Gotham. If you're willing to get over that ego of yours, I think we could make something *interesting* out of you."

Ew, no thanks . Also, pot meet kettle.

But that was probably as close as Tim was going to get to what he wanted. It'd be better if he could walk the kids out himself, could hand them over to the paramedics and have a moment to catch his breath before going toe-to-toe with Nygma, but this would work. Kids out, attended to, and Tim would be alone with Eddie.

It was enough. Tim would make sure of it.

"Make the call. It had better be in walking distance," Tim said flatly, as much of an agreement as he was willing to give, turning his attention back to the boxes. There were still a few he needed to open.

Overhead, the hiss of the speakers quieted slightly, though Tim could still hear Eddie's voice faintly enough to tell he did seem to be making a phone call. Could be a trick, but Nygma wasn't normally that stupid. Tim would keep an eye out for it.

Another series of clicks, one lock after another, and the last of the kids were free.

Now the hard part. Tim ignored the tearing in his side and in his chest, turning and setting Luke down gently. He let his hands linger for a second, a quick squeeze to the back of his neck, just one more second to hold him, and then he looked at the gaggle of frightened children.

None of them looked any older than Luke. Eddie had apparently tried to get kids around the same size, maybe to make the tower more

realistic. They were tiny. Terrified. Most of them were crying, shaking, or both. Even if the pick up point was right outside, they'd never make it like this.

Tim dropped into a crouch. "Hey guys. Every one of you should be proud. You've bee n so, *so* brave, and if you hadn't been I couldn't have gotten you out of there. It's nearly over, okay? I just need you to be brave a little longer. Luke, buddy, can you do one last thing for me?"

I t was like Tim had flipped a switch, Luke's shoulder's straightening and his eyes going sharp at the prospect of a *job* . Something to do, something that would help.

The choice was acid in his gut, but he couldn't see another option, not right now. Not like this. Luke was a good kid. He deserved better, but he'd do it anyways. Of course he would. And Tim had to ask because he *couldn't* be everywhere at once and he couldn't exactly call for backup if he wanted to just go *home* when he was done with Nygma . It wasn't fair, but Tim needed *something* .

"You're gonna be in charge of the address, okay? Make sure everyone gets there alright, and if anything, and I mean *anything*, seems even a little weird you make sure everyone hides. You can do this, I know you can. Just be careful."

"I can do that." Luke repeated back, lighting up like a candle and Tim couldn't regret anything that made him look like that, inadvisable though it definitely was. "But Riddler's still got the paper, right?"

This was also going to be tricky. Good thing that was kind of Tim's specialty these days. "He does, but I'm gonna go get it and bring the address out to you. Just wait right here and I'll be right back. The rest of you, catch your breath and if you start to feel bad there's no shame in sitting down. Take care of yourselves, and take care of each other ."

I t wasn't enough, but Luke looked a little more sure of himself, and the others were huddling around him. They'd look after each other, and Tim would be back before they knew it. He'd make sure of it.

O ne stolen second, a squeeze of Luke's tiny shoulder, and then Tim pivoted to face the foreman's station, the ad d ress he needed, and, of course, the Riddler himself.

Tim noted that that the guns hadn't been audibly lowered, though he couldn't really see any of the potential shooters past the spotlights. He'd have to hope his threats had hit hard enough to make them second guess just gunning down him or any of the kids the second they thought his guard faltered . He couldn't give them anything.

Not that that was an issue with how deep in his own head he was. Tim couldn't make noise as he walked if he had wanted to, too busy listening to the quiet shifting behind him, flicking his gaze around the edges of the shadowy catwalks. He ought to be deescalating, walking loud and confident to both put on a show and to try to reinforce the persona that was Alvin. Competent but loud. Intelligent but blunt. All flash and just a enough substance to back it up.

There was none of that now. Just the blood staining the inside of his

jacket, the ghosts oh his steps, the objective. Tim ought to lie. That wasn't on the table.

Tim stepped out of the reach of the spotlight and he couldn't see a damn thing, his night vision shot to hell. It was the same sort of blackness that lived in the depths of the Cave, in the depths of the Bat. That was fine. It had been years since Tim had needed his eyes to see and he'd made a career out of jumping into the dark .

The kids stayed in the light, though, and that was what mattered.

Eventually, he could see the sliver of a glow, maybe a desk lamp shining under a doorway. And then the door was swinging and Tim was another kind of blind. Joy of joys, Tim's retinas were filing complaints as he spoke.

"I believe you have something for me?" Tim didn't quite hold out his hand, because he wasn't confident it wouldn't get stabbed, but it was very heavily implied.

F or a moment, the world was so still that Tim thought he'd bet wrong about Nygma, thought that maybe *this* was how he was going to get 'outsmarted,' and then his eyes adjusted again and it was just Eddie standing in the cheap, buzzing lighting holding a scrap of what looked like an incident report with an address that from at least the street name Tim could see was about three blocks away .

T he look on his face was something else, sharp and mocking and just

a little bit *hungry* . Maybe Eddie was more desperate for a playmate than he would one day be when he had a dozen Bats and Birds to bother. Maybe Tim could use that.

Eddie held the paper like a cigarette and behind his own tacky green domino he was raising an eyebrow. “ If you try to run off with this, your toddlers won’t get far.”

If a single one of those kids got hurt any worse than they already were, Tim would *not* be held responsible for his actions.

So long as they were quick and quiet, the kids ought to get to the alleged meeting point alright. The bigger question was going to be if they could stay safe while waiting. For a bunch of kids, EMS would get there as soon as they could, but they’d probably be looking at multiple vehicles and there was no way they’d come straight from another case unless whatever it was had been almost entirely benign, so they’d be stuck there in the middle of the night for anywhere from ten to forty-five minutes.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Tim knew he was overthinking this. There were dozens of variables that impacted response times, and without tuning into the dispatch chatter, he *couldn’t* know for sure. He really wanted to, though. Every inch of uncertainty stung.

“You’re going to have to decide whether you think I’m an idiot or clever at some point,” Tim said, and it could have been wry but all that came out was a flat sort of impatience. He really was doing himself no favours. Still, Eddie didn’t snatch back the address when Tim reached for it, so he’d take what he could get.

The walk back to the kids just about gave Tim vertigo, but that was neither here nor there. More relevant was the way Luke managed a tiny smile when he took the address. All together, tre k king out into the night in little huddles threaded together, they looked like an incredibly lost class that had lost their chaperone. Because he was staying behind to play card games with a criminal.

Classic Gotham field trip.

Meanwhile Tim was going to have an involuntary job interview, which in its own way was a semi-regular local occurrence as well. Admittedly, Tim preferred to be the instigator of this sort of thing, but if he thought of it like that he almost wasn't flying blind.

Still no clear sounds from overhead to set Tim's nerves anything like at ease, but that wasn't going to be on the table until he was done for the night and safely home anyways, so Tim tried to refocus on the present. He had officially relinquished control of those kids' safety, and until he sorted this out, he wouldn't be able to help them.

So, Eddie. Back home he would be able to play a quick round of something and offer an advantage in their next game night and that ought to do the trick to end things as quickly as possible, but if Tim was back home then this wouldn't even be happening. *His* Riddler knew better than to pull this kind of nonsense.

He could always just gently maim Nygma until he got the point and then do his best to leave without getting shot by the plethora of

people who would definitely try if a fight broke out. But Tim really wasn't feeling up to dodging more bullets if he didn't have to.

Which unfortunately meant Tim needed to keep a handle on the rage that hadn't stopped scraping at the underside of his lungs for a little bit longer.

Shouldn't be too heard, all he had to do was throw increasingly passive-aggressive riddles at Eddie until he stumped him and then Tim could escape while he had a breakdown about it. That would be almost as satisfying as dislocating his knees. Which was still a bad idea so long as the jackasses with guns were about and could still go after the kids. There were a good fifteen minutes between now and when it might be safe to pick a physical fight. Life was all about compromise, Tim could make do.

For whatever reason, he was able to walk back through the shadows without aggravating the armed peanut gallery which was probably for the best, and then it was that door again and Tim was out of time for witty scheming.

Tim didn't wait for the door to open this time, shouldering his way inside before Eddie could even try, refusing to think about the way his still shaky hands had fumbled. "Alright, the kids have gone to bed. What do the *adults* get to talk about?"

"Is that what you are?" Apparently Tim walking back and forth in the dark had done wonders for Nygma's nerves, most of that earlier hunger shoved back behind his usual veneer of arrogance and disdain. "An adult? Or is that just what you say when it gets you what you want?"

And here Tim had been thinking that as long as he avoided Hugo Strange he wouldn't have to be subjected to amateur psychoanalysis. "I dunno, do you tell people you're smart every time you remember that you get consistently outplayed by a kid who can't remember to put on pants before he leaves the house, or is that just how you get to sleep at night?"

This was pretty much the opposite of productive, but it had been so *long* since Tim had really gotten to quip at anyone, and it was a better outlet than seeing how much of the cheap office furniture Tim could break using only Eddie's face. He could be a little bit of a bastard. As a treat.

And it *was* a treat to watch the Riddler's lips thin and curl into a sneer, to watch that jab *hit*. "You're not as clever as you think you are. There are only so many times you can insult me instead of answering a question."

"Wanna bet?" The words were out of Tim's mouth before he could even consider them, pointed and cocky and precisely the sort of inflammatory statement that would keep him in this stupid warehouse for another hour. Whoops. "But I *am* serious. You have yet to give me any real reason to respect you, and a whole lot of reasons to think you're either incompetent or malicious. Neither of which make me inclined to take advice from you."

Nygma's sneer dialed back, but the vicious cut of his features only sharpened. "You're in no place to judge. If you're the young man I think you are, you've been causing a great deal of trouble for more than just me tonight. Tell me, what exactly *were* you doing answering Batman's phone earlier?"

Not where Tim had expected this to go. But maybe this train of thought would lower the chances of Tim doing something he couldn't undo. Better they talk about Tim than the kids. "The car was just out there. Saw an opportunity for a ride. Seemed only polite to pick up the call since he wasn't exactly there to do it."

"And that's something you do a lot, hm? Notice openings and take advantage of whomever you come across." Oh, Tim didn't like his tone there. It sounded like the Riddler thought he was on to something and Tim would kind of prefer if he just fucked right off.

Especially when he was talking about something he had *no* idea about. Eddie was clever, but this version at least didn't know enough about Tim to make that sort of assumption. Hadn't earned the right yet.

"Grasping at straws there, Eddie. Just because it happened to you doesn't mean I do it to everybody." The words could have been a joke, but the way they stuck to his tongue meant it was spitting or silence. "Sometimes you *are* just a little bit special."

Nygma caught the scent of blood and Tim had only himself to blame. "I don't think you believe that. I can't imagine you think just about *anybody* is truly special, or at least that it ought to matter. Which is why you were so particular about the gremlins. Some trite belief about the value of everyone's future, surely ."

"Where are you going with this? My beliefs are my own and they're also none of your business. I've got a job, I've got a *life,* and I'm not

looking for new ones.” It burned how honest that was.

“You’re too *tuned* for that to be entirely true. You’ve been shaped for a purpose, and it’s one I don’t think you have access to anymore. Riddle me this, what is most useful when it’s broken?” Eddie said, softer than just about anything but Bruce had been this entire night, and all the more poisonous for it.

An interesting question. The normal answer to the riddle would be an egg, but that wasn’t really all that relevant. On the other hand, Tim wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of calling himself a broken thing.

“How do you drop a raw egg on the sidewalk without breaking it?” Tim countered. All bird metaphors aside, Tim wasn’t a child and he certainly wasn’t fragile. He wasn’t the egg, he was the concrete. “You’re making an awful lot of assumptions about me tonight, though I suppose that’s basically your modus operandi. All guesswork and probing questions hoping I’ll to give you enough material to figure out how to convince me to take on what I can only imagine would be the world’s second worst internship.”

The vague sense of a raised eyebrow. “And you won’t tell me about the worst so-called ‘internship,’ will you? You sound like you’ve lived in Gotham your whole life, but there’s no way you just crawled out of the woodwork like this. You’ve clearly-” a pointed up and down of Tim’s admittedly bedraggled but still very obviously non-civilian tunic. “Armoured yourself up, but the question remains – are you blackened from coming out of the water, or are is this where you peak before going into the pot?

Well that was obtuse. It sounded like Eddie was getting at a set of mirrored riddles – black into the water and red coming out versus red into the water and black coming out. A lobster and iron respectively. And it was telling the Nygma still couldn't decide if Tim was actually a rookie or not. Maybe if he thought Tim was a fully formed actor rather than a baby villain, he'd back off.

Worth a shot, even if Tim wouldn't hold his breath.

"Not being noticed doesn't mean I haven't been busy. Whether you think that's been in the frying pan or the fire is your business. I know what I'm doing. So long as you leave literal children out of your power-plays and schemes, I don't really care," Tim said, rolling his shoulders minutely to try and alleviate the lingering burn without tugging too harshly at the still oozing wound in his side. "Now, I do actually have somewhere to be after this, so how about we cut the chatter and get to the Bullshit?"

Tim hadn't expected Eddie to laugh at that, but maybe he should have. Fuck, but he was tired and off his game. He needed to get home.

"You're either blind or trying to convince me you're an idiot." In a fun little sleight of hand trick, Eddie pulled a deck of cards from his jacket pocket. He was fast enough most people would have missed it, though only about on par with most of Gotham's more dramatically inclined Rogues. Nothing to scoff at, but still. Tim had seen better. "We'll play, and we'll talk. And when *I've* decided the time is right, you can go back to babysitting."

That wasn't quite what Tim had been going for, but he would take it. He could get through this.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your patience!!! This has been a long time coming! Literally so much time. And hilariously, I have only like 60% edited this chapter. I wrote out the rest of the fic (sans epilogue lol) and have been sitting on this section since like,,,, Decemberish? And given I normally post everything immediately after writing it, this was so much self control. But the time is now!!! I'm posting this. Then I'm gonna spend the next week editing the next section and then I'll post it. And then same thing for the ending, and then I'll post. The epilogue'll get done when it gets done :p

This chapter was a lot of fun but also hard! Lots of weird logistics that I'm probably gonna take another look at to fix again at some point but honestly the physics of it have been out of my head for genuine months so we'll see.

I hope all of you have been doing well these last few months, and thank you so much for sticking with me through this absolutely wild journey of a story. We're nearly there! Have an absolutely wonderful week <333

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING!!!! PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE THE CHAPTER!!!!
>
> This chapter requires some content warnings that are spoilers. As a result, those warnings are in the author's note at the bottom of the page. Please take care of yourselves, and if you need advance notice about potentially upsetting material, consider taking a look at them before proceeding.
>
> And finally- this was always how this story went. This was always the plan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-seven minutes, two entirely separate decks of cards, and one bottle of bewilderingly sourced alcohol later, and Tim was finally free.

Mostly because a tipsy Eddie had felt that two won rounds and a scheduled game of Settlers of Catan a week and a half away were sufficient ‘reparations’ for having ruined his planned play-date with Batman. Which was honestly a better outcome than Tim had been sure he’d get.

A few victories of his own, the opportunity to make some pointed and personal threats, and a throwing disk planted under the table primed to explode in three minutes had also done wonders for Tim’s patience. It wouldn’t kill Nygma, since Tim tried not to carry around ordinance capable of that sort of thing for very obvious safety reasons, but it ought to scare the shit out of him. Maybe some light burns. A little shrapnel damage. Between that and Tim taking a moment to re-stitch and dress his injury, Tim was almost hitting a second wind. Third wind? It’d been a long night.

But all Tim had to do was make sure the kids had gotten collected by EMS, and maybe hitch a ride to Leslie's clinic himself. He could check on Jason, and hopefully pass out in a relatively safe chair. Maybe he could convince someone to grab him something to eat. Leslie, at least, tended to keep protein bars in her desk that she might be willing to surrender if Tim looked pathetic enough. Bad for his dignity, but it'd be great for his steadily shrivelling stomach.

In what could only be considered an act of petty malice, Nygma had refused to give Tim the exact address he had sent the kids to, but that was fine. Tim knew at least one of the streets was Muir and he'd go for the shortest route there. If he couldn't get a view from ground level, he'd hit the rooftops.

He'd really, *really* prefer not to though. Despite his best efforts to hide it while playing cards, Tim still hadn't regained full sensation in his fingertips, which was a general recipe for disaster when urban climbing.

The night was still chilly, not helped by the hole in his jacket nor the half-dried blood slicking the side of Tim's tunic. There was probably also something to be said about the effects of the blood loss. Most of the street lights worked, if a little flickery, but the extra light didn't set Tim particularly at ease. Just because Deadshot claimed to be no longer interested in killing him didn't mean that was true, nor did it mean that he was the only hitman Penguin hired. Tim couldn't stop watching the edges of buildings, even as he knew that anyone worth their paycheck ought to be able to keep out of sight.

At least the light had probably helped the kids feel a little bit better about wandering around on their own.

In the distance but closer than Tim would have expected, a car backfired. A siren screamed another few blocks over. The back of Tim's throat tasted faintly of metal and when he ran his tongue across his teeth, the mucosa in his cheeks clung to it. He would have expected to see the circling lights of at least one ambulance by now. Sure the kids would be a high enough priority to deserve transport straight away, but with very obviously no guarantee of any way to pay for the trip and hopefully at least one kid willing to mention an adult who was responsible for them, there was a solid chance Gotham's paramedics would have left *someone* to liaison with him and get his end of the story.

His heavily redacted end of the story, anyways.

But other than the overhead lights and the very occasional passing car, the street was dark.

The stone that had formed in Tim's gut the second the kids had left his sight, the icy weight that he had been pointedly ignoring in favour of focusing on the direct threat in front of him, rolled right into the cavity where his spleen used to be.

He picked up the pace.

Now Tim was no criminal mastermind for all that he loved brainteasers, but he knew that based on the area there was a variety of possible stupid jokes Eddie could have gone for with crossroads. Whatever it was, he'd want it to be relevant, and he hadn't exactly had a lot of time to come up with it. So it was either going to be some sort of child related pun, game related pun, or a commentary on Tim himself.

The nearest roads were Moench, Markhoz, and Pratchett to the west, and Hiller, Conroy, and Meredyth to the east. Where was the joke?

Where were the kids?

Muir was Scots for ‘moorland’ and Scots Gaelic for ‘sea,’ both incredibly dangerous places to leave children unattended. Did any of the crossroads have some sort of aquatic significance? Moench was German, went all the way back to Greek for ‘alone.’ The kids were in a group, even if Tim wasn’t with them. Pratchett, Welsh, ‘son of Richard,’ might be worth keeping an eye out for anyone who knew Dick’s identity using that one but not really helpful here. Hiller, also German but this one was a straight translation to ‘battle guard,’ could have something to do with Tim himself but had nothing to do with any kids-

Of course. *Kids*. Markhoz was a type of goat, Iranian, used for its wool and its milk. Baby goats. Where do you want to get help as quickly as possible? The corner of danger and *kids*.

A block and a half. Standard procedure for ambulances was to park around fifty feet from the site of the injury, especially if they anticipated multiple vehicles inbound. The lights should be visible from here.

Tim took off in a sprint.

His knees ached. His socks chafed against his soles and ankles. Every step pulled at his sore thighs and calves, propelling him through the ghost of smoke in his lungs.

The corner of danger and children.

Tim skidded to a stop and looked one way down Markhoz then the other. Nothing. No kids, no ambulance.

He'd told Luke to make sure everyone hid if anything looked off. The kid had a good head on his shoulders and good instincts. If they'd had any warning, he'd have gotten them out of sight. Not up, there was no way some of those kids could climb right now. Down was out too, the manholes far too heavy for the kids to move on their own and none of the sewer grates were damaged enough for anything bigger than a starved rat to get through. If they were still here, and even that shard of doubt was trying to burrow further into Tim's chest, they had to be somewhere on ground level, somewhere a whole second grade class could-

Alley. Just across the street, cutting between a tire place and a fasteners machining shop. There'd be hiding spots and loose scrap metal, Tim could practically taste the rubber and iron from here.

Had to be there, they *had* to be.

Pure luck kept Tim from being hit by a car when he bolted for it, the loose tail of his jacket clattering across pitted paint, a horn blaring up and down the street. The driver didn't stop. Tim couldn't give a shit.

The mouth of the alley was empty, but that might just mean they'd done a good job. Assess, near to far, from the edges of the light to the shadowy corners beyond, anything that could hide a child might be doing so, he had to check *everywhere,* if there was even one kid still here they were his responsibility.

"Hello?" he called, not really expecting an answer. The quiet between the brickwork was too hungry, too *wide* but he had to ask, just in case. "Luke? Kids?"

A beat of silence that gnawed at every organ he had left and Tim breathed through it. They couldn't have gotten far if they'd gone on their own, and if they'd been taken again at least Luke would have tried to leave some evidence-

"Mister Alvin? Is that you?" came a tiny voice from the belly of the dark. Tim didn't recognize it. That didn't matter.

He didn't move. Couldn't so much as twitch on the off-chance it spooked whoever was still here. On the off-chance it was a trap. "It's me, chipmunk. Wanna come out where I can see you, or do you feel safe where you are?"

Another pause that stretched and twisted like a bungee cord, and then

from behind the scrap dumpster, a pile of shredded tires, some mildewy boxes, and on and on, kids emerged from the shadows to stare at him. All of them frightened, shaking. None of them came towards him.

And there was someone notably missing.

“Where’s Luke?” Tim was absolutely certain, with the same surety guided him through cases and combat, that he didn’t want to hear the answer.

He needed to anyways.

A different kid spoke, hollow and quiet. “Gone. The ‘bulance came. Lights were the wrong colour. Green. Luke told us to hide, but before he could get away they grabbed ‘im. We hid.”

Tim froze. The poor kid had gotten kidnapped *again.* Second time tonight. And Tim hadn’t been there. But he could go after them, he could still get his kid back. He just needed a lead. “Did anyone see who grabbed him?”

If they were operating a fake ambulance, they were probably organ traffickers which, while fucked up, gave Tim a decent window for rescue as they wouldn’t want to kill him until they had a guaranteed buyer. If he could just find somewhere to start-

“I did,” said a little girl, tears on her face and a brittle set to her jaw. “It was the Joker.”

--

Tim didn’t shut down. Couldn’t even if he had wanted to. Couldn’t tune out the renewed crying from one of the little girls huddled behind a trash can, couldn’t look away from the reflection of the streetlights in the whites of another boy’s eyes.

They’d trusted him to keep them safe.

And now Luke was gone.

He had to go after him, every second he wasted was a second the Joker could and probably *would* kill him. He had to go.

But he couldn’t leave these kids alone, not again, not after what he’d let happen to them. This was still well into the industrial district and they were tiny and exhausted. They were *terrified*. There was no way they’d trust another ambulance if he called one. Not after the last one had gone so badly.

He’d told them they’d be safe.

Tim couldn't give them back those moments of hope, but he knew someone who could. This was not going to be a fun call.

Despite not actually having anyone to talk to over comms since he'd landed in the past, Tim still *had* his and kept it with the rest of his gear. The pocket for it was usually by his sternum on the left when he wore the straps properly and now nearly dead centre on his hips. Refusing to let himself be intimidated by the concept of speaking to a teenager, Tim flicked the small switch on his comm that would cycle it through various common Bat-frequencies and slipped it into his ear.

Static, hissing, uncomfortably loud, but not enough to scratch at the screaming wall that was between him and anything but *what next?* Literal white noise, and then-

The whispering quiet of an open line, the slight breath sounds of someone jumping over rooftops, the little *hup* that Dick still did twelve-years from now when he was doing a particular series of twisting flips. Tim turned off the cycling and took a breath of his own.

He'd have one shot at an opener. Better make it a good one.

"Hey Boy Wonder, guess who." Tim tried to keep the tone light but there was no way to really soften the blow of such an outrageous security breach.

“You mother*fucker*.” Wow okay strong words there. Yikes. “Where are you?”

That certainly made things easier.

Tim took a step out of the alley, doing a quick scan for street signs and landmarks. “An alley on Muir just north of Markhoz. I’ve got a bunch of kids who need medical attention and aren’t going to trust an ambulance right now. They’ve all experienced a prolonged electric shock and have been outside for about twenty-five minutes. It’s been a rough night for all of them. What’s your ETA?”

Giving Dick any leeway to control this conversation would waste time, time that Luke didn’t have. And Tim didn’t really know if he was capable of explaining anything complicated right now. The weighted web of his lies was too far out of reach to bother with.

If Robin asked a question, Tim might just tell him the truth.

A pause as Dick weighed his options. Tim couldn’t bring himself to care, too busy trying to figure out what exactly he was going to do if Dick decided not to help, if he decided this was a trap, if he brought *Batman* with him-

There were a lot of ways trusting Dick could go wrong, and every single one was its own acid.

“Five minutes,” Dick said finally. Probably a lie. Which meant Tim needed to finish here and get going in the next two minutes. “You’d better still be there when I land.”

Not fucking likely. There was no time.

To start with, Tim needed to give these kids *something* to protect themselves, safety of the timeline be damned. After a brief check, Tim opted to draw a couple of throwing discs from his belt, and then he dropped into a crouch. One glance, most of the kids were shying away from him, but there were a handful that still seemed to think he was the lesser evil.

That was a kind of burning, too.

Tim held out the discs on offer, then set two down carefully. Then he took the other and showed them the large button along the edge. “If you press this and let go, you have five seconds to throw it, and then it explodes. You need to be six feet away to be safe, okay? I can’t stay, I have to go after Luke.”

“You’re not going to catch them,” one of the kids at the back said quietly, more than half-hidden behind a scrap recycling dumpster. They were holding a piece of poorly machined metal awkwardly, its jagged edge cutting into their fingers.

The lack of faith was just as sharp, but Tim deserved it. The only thing he could do was *fix* this. “I have to try. It’s the least he deserves.”

None of the kids approached, and Tim let it chip at the edges of the wide space that was trying to swallow him. That wasn’t important right now. All he could do was set the last of the discs on the ground. They were there if the kids wanted them.

Just before Tim turned away, the same little girl who had seen the Joker spoke again. “Think it was ten minutes ago. Maybe a little more.”

Fuck, Tim hadn’t even thought to *ask* for the time frame, and that was crime scene investigation 101. At least someone here had their head screwed on right. “Thanks kid. Stay safe.”

He couldn’t get there *soon* , but he could *get there*. That might still be enough.

Tim couldn’t actually be sure where the Joker was taking Luke, one of the most infuriating things about the guy was his unpredictability, but Tim *could* probably track a stolen ambulance. They all had GPS trackers to help dispatch assign calls and at this point anything was better than nothing. Tim would take a *dousing rod* if it led him to Luke. Thankfully, GPS mapping wasn’t out of his wheelhouse so he didn’t have to resort to folklore divination just yet.

In the entire time Tim had been in the past, he’d done an excellent job

not pinging any literal radars, mostly by keeping his tech to himself. Other than his initial hack into Luthor's bank account back on that very first day, Tim hadn't used his own devices to so much as sneeze at anything that had even a basic level of security. Just safest if he didn't poke too many bears with too many very fancy sticks.

But here and now Tim couldn't care less about what was safest. He already knew the route into to the Lexcorp satellite that *totally* wasn't placed to spy on Gotham, no siree, and that had access to all sorts of networks it wasn't supposed to. Tim piggybacked off of it's spyware on his wrist computer and immediately snooped into the Gotham EMS real-time monitoring. All well and good, but that only got him the haystack.

He still had to find the needle.

Trying to figure out what was and wasn't regular ambulance movement in this city was a fool's errand, but maybe if he could just get a clue? A fragment would do, Tim had found people on less.

No point trying to search the city map with a grid system, no matter what B said the city just wasn't built for it. Too many weird alleys and side roads and that was without taking into account the way the city's waterways absolutely tanked any sense of linearity.

What Tim did know, however, was the point of origin.

To have grabbed Luke, it had to have physically *been* there. If they

were even vaguely following traffic laws- not a given but there were still physical limits on the landspeed of an ambulance- then Tim had a working-ish radius. Using a ray search pattern from the alley where Tim supposed the kids must still be, Tim focused on finding a point moving fast and *away*.

One moving south-southwest, stopped at a red light- probably no, another cutting nearly straight northeast along the harbour line, a little too close to be the Joker on a joyride, no, no-

There. A little glowing dot moving north at what had to be at least seventy miles an hour on a road Tim was intimately aware was a thirty. And it was heading straight for Amusement Mile.

He'd asked for a bone and the universe had thrown him an entire goddamn skeleton.

On foot, Tim was fucked. He knew it even as he pulled himself up onto a fire escape and beelined north. There was no way he could get there in time, and that was assuming Luke was even still *alive*-

So he needed a ride. Couldn't swing the whole way to the world's least fun abusement park if he wanted to be there in the next hour for all that the wind in his ears was doing wonders for his stress levels. He'd really prefer to have been there an hour ago, but beggars and choosing and all that.

One notable disadvantage of being in a semi-industrial district was

that most of the vehicles were sixteen wheelers that couldn't accelerate for love or money and were firmly locked behind probably half-decent bay doors. Anything else was better suited for moving freight around than for chasing a child murderer, though there was something to be said for the image of the Joker impaled on a three foot steel pronghaving a certain appeal.

Tim took a quick glance at another warehouse yard, and oh that forklift there probably shouldn't have been left out. It looked like a five-speed propane machine, and one manager's loss was Tim's gain.

For whatever reason, Tim had never tried to hot-wire a forklift before, but there was a first time for everything, and it wasn't like anyone had ever really considered advanced anti-theft defences for this thing. In under twenty seconds he had the engine going and while a distant part of Tim was worried about how full its tank was, there was no time to worry about it. If he was careful and managed the weight, he could get this thing up to at least thirty an hour and he'd take it.

And worst case scenario, it wasn't like he had to worry about avoiding irreparable damage to the poor thing. He just needed to *go*.

Gotham's streets weren't really designed for high-speed industrial vehicles, but the same could be said for half of the weird things that villains and vigilantes alike would one day drive around so instead of worrying about potential damage to the asphalt, Tim focused on getting the right drift as he went around corners and on trying not to tip the whole thing over.

It was, just a little, like trying to ride an incredibly unwieldy skateboard with a giant fork stuck to the front of it. Focused weight

management and uncompromising axles, but Tim couldn't really enjoy the familiarity. All he could think about was Luke.

Where he was, whether he was still alive, whether that was even a *good* thing-

There was no way to know until he caught up to them, and he *was* going to catch up. He had to.

He couldn't check the map while driving. The screen was just far enough on the outside of his wrist to make it warped and illegible with both hands on the wheel, and he was already pushing the limits of this vehicle way past what was safe. All he had was a single thread of evidence and a hunch.

Luke depended on him being right.

Even at this hour, there was still traffic, and Tim had absolutely no patience. He cut through alleys when he could, but the forklift didn't exactly have the same manoeuvrability as a bike, and after scraping a prong on two separate dumpsters in one of the least pleasant metal-on-metal screeches he'd heard in a long time, Tim had no choice but to take the main streets. Gotham wasn't exactly designed for straight line travel, and more than once Tim took the left side of the road to save time. Nearly caused a couple of accidents, but that didn't matter right now either. Couldn't.

The engine screamed and if it weren't for the open top, Tim might

have worried about choking on the smoke that billowed out from under his seat. But he was pretty sure he was pushing thirty-five miles an hour, and the possibly literal fire under his ass was irrelevant in the face of how *close* he was. He could all but *taste* the sickly sweet stench of grease paint that hung around the Joker like a soaked and rotting curtain.

Amusement Mile loomed ahead. The corpse of a coaster framed the park and stretched to the sky like an arched spine.

There was no ambulance sight.

For one icy moment, as frigid, black, and breathless as the water under an ice cap, Tim thought he'd guessed wrong. That he'd trusted his gut, trusted his own judgment, and Luke would die for his arrogance.

And then he saw the crumpled form just before the locked gates of the park.

Every inch of his flesh froze solid even as he jumped from the forklift, engine still running. He tried to swallow a scream that stuck to the back of his teeth and slid to his knees in a spray of gravel.

Luke lay curled on his side, shoulders shaking. A high-pitched whistle sawed back and forth through the air, and some part of Tim folded back on itself and splintered.

As gently as he could, Tim rolled Luke over and into his lap.

Little hands scrabbled at his jacket, his tunic, as far up his neck as they could reach, their shaking touch burning through layers of fabric and armour. Luke's face was twisted into a rictus grin, eyes wideand tear-tracks carving lines through the dust on his skin. Gasping, wheezing noises choked their way out of his throat and each one was a different knife in Tim's chest.

He'd used the last of his Joker Venom antitoxin to torture Hellfern, he couldn't fix this here, but maybe if he could get Luke to a hospital they could keep him alive long enough for him to-

Behind them, the forklift's overworked engine sputtered out.

Maybe he'd pushed it too hard or maybe it had run out of fuel.

Either way, it didn't really matter.

"A-Alv- " Luke tried, leaning into Tim's hold only to nearly throw himself out of reach with a particularly gut-wrenching giggle. "H-urts."

Tim stripped off his domino and cupped the back of his little boy's head, trying to steady him without restricting his movement too much. One bad spasm could break his neck if he wasn't careful. "I know, kiddo. You did so good. All the other kid are safe. Just focus on breathing, okay? I've got you."

That was a lie. He wanted it to be true, more than he wanted his next heartbeat, but it wasn't. He'd been dead-on with his detective work all day, and it didn't mean a thing because he'd been caught completely off guard anyways.

He hadn't even known the Joker was *active*.

Luke didn't need to hear that though. A blood vessel had burst in his eye and stained the sclera a haunting red. The inside of his lips were beginning to turn purple, and he hadn't taken a full chested breath since Tim had arrived. One hand wound into Tim's jacket and was holding on even as Luke's grip faltered with each laugh.

His kid was dying, and Tim had nothing left to try. Even if he gave up the ghost and called Batman himself, there was no way any kind of help could get here in time. He could scream for Superman, but with no personal connection and his respect for Bruce's territorial habits, it'd be a miracle if he even noticed.

Another laughing fit tore through Luke, and Tim did his best to keep him tucked against him while also keep his chest as open as possible. No need to let the chipmunk suffer more than he had to.

When the hysterics subsided, Luke spoke again, all stuttered consonants and painfully drawn out vowels. “I-’m sc-ared, Al’vn.”

“You’re so brave, Luke,” Tim pressed the words and a kiss into his hair. That was true at least. One of the bravest kids Tim had ever known, in or out of a cape. “You’ve tried so hard and are so good, and you’re not alone. I’m right here and I’m so proud of you.”

The next noise was more a sob than a laugh, and behind the familiar flickers of warmth Luke’s presence always brought, there was nothing but blades and darkness under Tim’s skin.

“C’n we- g-oh h’me?” His voice was small and ragged, split through with wheezing whistles that Tim would dream about for the rest of his life.

All Tim could offer was another cherry blossom lie. “Yeah, chipmunk. I’ll get you home. We’re just going to sit tight for a little while, okay? Just until you catch your breath.”

Luke choked on his response, the following round of giggles weaker than before and scraped raw. In the aftermath his throat clicked and the corners of his mouth had split open, blood oozing lazily. It was getting easier to keep a good hold on him for all that he was shaking constantly now, skin slick beneath Tim’s gloves with his own sweat and spit.

“M’ssed you,” Luke slurred through his mostly frozen lips, glassy gaze

flickering from Tim's jaw to his eyes. "Knew you'd f'nd me."

Tim didn't try to blink away the tears, just let them spill out as he ran a thumb across Luke's baby-soft cheekbone. "Course I found you. I missed you too. Had to come get my favourite chipmunk."

"'M your fav'rite?" Luke's eyes widened minutely, tugging at the stillcreeping hemorrhage that had spread to cover most of his left eye.

"Yeah," Tim tried to smile, but he barely managed to twitch his lips. Luke didn't seem to notice, just tipped his head weakly into Tim's arm, still staring unfocused at Tim's face. "You're my favourite."

Even the shaking had subsided now, Luke's breathing so shallow the wheezing was barely audible. Tim tugged him closer, couldn't help himself.

Wouldn't be long now.

For a couple of seconds Luke's mouth moved soundlessly until finally he forced somethingout, barely a couple of consonants and some air, but it cut Tim to the bone. "Y'r m'ne too."

His little hand that had stayed wrapped in Tim's jacket held on for another beat, for another lifetime, and then it went slack. Despite the lack of grip, he'd gotten far enough into the fabric that rather than fall

away, his fingers got caught in the gaping hole left by Deadshot. The weight in Tim's arms didn't really change, but it was the difference between holding a basket and holding a gut wound.

Tim didn't move for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Child death, minor character death
If you'd prefer not to read anything like that, you should stop reading at the line -

And then he saw the crumpled form just before the locked gates of the park.

Howdy folks. So uh. That was probably a lot, right? I wasn't lying in the note at the beginning of the chapter - this has been the plan basically the entire time. I knew Luke was going to die before I even really knew who he was, back when this fic was still just a discord conversation with ReplacementRobin. This has been a long time in the making.

In terms of process, for all that I knew how this was going to go, I didn't actually write this at the start. I pretty specifically left it as something to Get to in order to actually write the rest of the fic. It's been really interesting to write something that I knew was a tragedy when basically no one else did. There is stuff that I always intended to be foreshadowing throughout the fic, though god knows if it read that way to people. Many thanks to the handful of friends both online and IRL that let me scream at them about this dead kid for literally years before he actually died <3 Never would have gotten this far without them.

To any and everyone who's made some mention that they consider this a comfort fic - I am kind of sorry? This was the story I set out to write and I won't apologize for that, but I can admit I

underestimated just what it meant to break people's hearts when I outlined this. It doesn't exactly go Up from here, but things don't end quite this bad, I promise. In some ways, this story is still about the hope that I honestly didn't realize would be so central to it when I started. This story is still about the ways we can and do help each other, it's just also about how we can fail to do that as well. I've made mention of it here and there, but I do intend to have a sequel to this at some point that expands on where things go after this.

Next chapter will be out next week, most likely the Tuesday. The epilogue will be up basically whenever I finish it. Thank you all for your patience and all of your kindness and support. It has honestly meant the world to me.

Won't be long now. <3

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim couldn't really say how long it took, but by the time he finally shifted the knees of his leggings were full of tiny stones and his joints creaked with the movement. Without his permission, his head tipped back, tearing his eyes away from Luke's unseeing stare and bringing him face to face with a camera lens, little red light blinking.

Every thought in his head was black and burning.

Tim couldn't see a microphone but that didn't mean anything. The idea couldn't penetrate the obsidian shell pressed against the inside of his skull. Maybe they'd been listened to, maybe not.

They were still being watched. They were being *entertainment*.

And everything but the boy in his hands and the bouquet of blades in his belly was blood in his mouth.

He could spit or he could choke on it all. "You're one of the sickest men I've ever met. I'm sure you found it funny. I hope this was fucking *hysterical*, because it's going to be the last time you do this to anyone. This won't happen again."

That might have been another lie. Had to be, if Tim ever wanted to go home. But the words crawled out of him and they cut like the truth. Saying them was no more a choice than what came next.

There was no response, no crackle of speakers coming to life to mock him, not even a recording of laughter. Just the sound of the city in the distance and the creak of the gates rocking back and forth in the wind.

With the forklift dead, Tim had no choice but to walk back to the main roads. Everything ached, a hammer beat at the apex of his spine, and his arms trembled under Luke's inconsequential weight. Rather than leaving Luke sprawled out in his hold, he adjusted his grip until they were chest to chest and Luke's head rested on his shoulder. His ears were full of a buzzing worse than usual, and Tim tried to force his breathing as slow and deep as he could manage. Wouldn't do to go into shock out here, alone. Not while he still had work to do.

Luke had asked to go home, but Tim couldn't just take him back to Crime Alley. There were protocols for this sort of thing.

Really, he should call another ambulance.

Not that he was going to. He just. Couldn't do that right now. He'd have to put Luke down, anyways.

So instead he set off west.

The closest hospital was Mercy General, and that was almost a whole island over. It was always a pain whenever rescuing victim's from any of the Joker's more elaborate schemes. That was okay. Tim had nothing but time right now.

Every step shrieked before dropping back into silence and Tim fell into a rhythm. He walked, he breathed, he adjusted Luke a little so as to not drop him, and he walked.

When he could, he cut through alleys and shadows to keep out of sight. Eventually, the sky faded to a dull grey, and Tim still had at least a mile and a half to go. He should have known exactly, normally would down to the foot, but Tim was barely tracking what block he was on. All he was sure of was that he needed to keep going, just a little longer.

A curb he hadn't expected caught him out, his ankle rolling beneath him, and it was all he could do to twist and fall on his ass instead of pitching forwards. For a beat he just sat there, cupping Luke's head to hold him steady as the chill of concrete and street slurry seeped through his pants.

There were very few places Tim wouldn't rather be right now.

But wherever he was going, he had to get there himself.

He just needed a second. Just until he could catch his breath. And then he'd get going again. It wasn't that much further. Not if he closed his eyes.

Another millennia passed and Tim had to face the world again. He looked up more out of necessity than any desire to see, and couldn't find it in himself to be surprised at the figure looming over him from the adjacent rooftop.

More than anything, he was tired. Tired of running in circles, tired of moving forwards and tripping over the same blocks again and *again.*Tim could solve any problem in front of him and never the ones that hatched and bloomed behind his back. The moment he lost the advantage, everyonearound him suffered for it.

He'd turned himself into a balancing act, but he loved each and every one of his plates, and there was always some fucker in the audience who thought it was funny to start throwing shit. Even if he had wanted to, Tim couldn't run. Not with Luke, and he wouldn't leave him. All he could do was sit and watch the Bat consider him.

"Do we have to do this now?" Tim already knew the answer, knew Batman wouldn't be able to let him go at this point, not after everything that had happened and not with a- with Luke in his arms. He still had to ask. Even if Bruce didn't know how it worked yet, Tim always had to ask. Just in case.

The shadow tipped its head but stayed where it was. Safely out of reach where Tim couldn't trick him, couldn't hurt him. Couldn't fail him either, which was probably for the best. When the words came, they were granite and as always Batman cut to the core of it. "What

happened?”

“I didn’t do enough.” It was a relief to admit to his own failure, lancing an infected wound. Tim had focused on all the wrong things and gotten caught up in every moment, every problem in front of him, had let himself forget the bigger picture of Gotham. And as always, it was the people around him that paid the price.

Particularly the people that he most wanted to protect.

Another beat of silence, not even interrupted by the Bat peeling off the building and dropping into the alley with him, and then- “Did you do this?

Tim tipped his head back down, picking out individual pieces of sediment that caught the watery morning light. “As good as. He trusted me and I failed.”

“Who?” The particular dig of a sparring strike, not really meant to do *harm* but still very much capable of hurting. It made Tim want to cry again. It made him want a *hug*.

He laughed instead, broken glass and broken promises. Tim carefully tilted Luke forward, gently untucking his little face from where it had been hidden against his neck. Even now, at least two hours later, the rigor mortis grin still twisted his features into a parody of joy while his glassy gaze betrayed the terror he had felt at the end.

“Guess.”

Batman took a knee in front of them, blocking Tim’s view of the sparkling grit that could almost, *almost* keep his eyes from the frozen grin on his boy. A twitch of the shoulders and the cape fell open, his hands steady and outstretched. “Let me help.”

And Tim splintered.

He ought to say no, it was critical to everything he loved ever getting the chance to exist that he *say no* , but there was still so far to go and maybe Tim *could* get there on his own, but god he didn’t want to. All he wanted was a little relief. Any thing to get him through this. He could make a lifeline out of fishing wire if he had to, so long as it was *something*. The only things he had now were a body full of aches, a head full of dust, and arms full of loss.

Tim didn’t know how to work with that.

“I promised I would take him home,” Tim croaked eventually. That was another truth, and that had to be good enough. It was all he had to offer.

Kevlar gloves closed on his own hands, gentle and sure. “Then we’ll get him home.”

Blood in his mouth as he bit his tongue, but at least it was bright and clear instead of the grief that gummed up any words that *needed* to flow smoothly if they were going to convince anyone at all, let alone Batman. Let alone himself.

Tim didn't protest as he was led quietly back to the very same batmobile he'd hijacked a lifetime and four hours ago. Better than having to steal another vehicle, and this way he didn't have to put Luke down to drive. From beneath him, the engine curled up his bones and its roar sank into the base of his skull. A tiny face pressed against the skin of his neck, too cold and stiff, and with every bump Tim expected to feel a little breath, a puff of air to give him goosebumps, but it never came.

Streetlights flickered by unevenly across the back of his eyelids, flaring up red and hot to split the hazy screaming black, until finally the car pulled to a stop. For a moment Tim just sat in a seat that had never known him with a boy he had never had a right to know.

And then he cracked the doorin a motion that was second nature.

Some part of Tim had expected the Cave. Like this was one of so many other bad nights and he would be able to hit the showers until he felt halfway human again. Hot chocolate and guilt and the warmth of his loved ones to guide him through it.

Instead, he was standing in front of Leslie's clinic and Tim had to focus on not swallowing his tongue. Somewhere inside was Jason, still

breathing.

Somewhere inside was a morgue, still waiting.

Behind him, the other door *clunked* open, and that was enough to spark Tim into motion again. He may have had to get dropped off by the Bat, but he didn't need to be escorted inside. This was his fuck up, he could own it.

At the very least he owed it to Luke to try.

The waiting room was the same. Just like it had been when he'd come here with Luke for meds, and just like it'd been when he'd come here as Robin. Ugly chairs and ancient magazines and bright overhead lights. The scattered and weary residents of Crime Alley's own slice of purgatory.

Tim made his way slowly to reception. The door behind him stayed shut. Even if he wanted to, Tim didn't have the space to wonder why.

At the desk, the receptionist glanced up at his approach. Their eyes immediately tracked up and down Luke's still form and then flicked back to Tim, lingering on his side and head. "Is this an emergency?"

"He's dead." Tim said flatly, holding the pain tight in his chest to keep it out of his voice. He hadn't said it yet. Hadn't made it real. But this

wasn't the place for half-truths or euphemisms.

Luke was dead. That was important.

The receptionist's sharp gaze softened, but only so much. No one in this job was unfamiliar with death, although no one who worked for Leslie was entirely without at least some compassion. All well and good, but it had been years since a stranger's sympathy could puncture Tim's grief in any meaningful way. It was nice that they cared. That didn't mean any of it actually helped.

Tim expected to be handed a clipboard like the last time he'd been here, or just generally pointed to the chairs to wait his turn, but from behind him a voice, gravel and surety and heartbreak. "It's an emergency."

Apparently that was good enough for the receptionist, who, after a searching look at Batman, pushed a button at his desk and stood up. "Let's get you both situated then."

From behind a set of swinging doors, another nurse emerged pushing a stretcher. Tim stared at it nonplussed. He didn't need help walking, and he was fairly sure that when he sat down he wouldn't be getting up for a while. This wasn't the time for that, not yet.

Not while he still had Luke.

Except the new nurse approached him, coming as close as they dared with the looming shadow behind him, and positioned the stretcher between them, and that's when things clicked. It wasn't for him. They wanted to take his kid away from him.

His first instinct was to refuse, to hold on and never let the tiny body in his arms go again, because he'd *promised*. But even as his grip tightened, Tim knew it was irrational. Dead was dead, whether it was pressed against his chest or sitting in a freezer down the hall. He wanted to scream.

Instead he set Luke down on the stretcher, hips then legs then shoulders and finally, gently as if he could still feel it, head. And because he couldn't help himself, Tim looked at the little boy who had trusted him.

Luke's face was still twisted into a terrified, grinning death mask and his skin had lost all warmth. His hair was full of dust and his dark eyes had already started to dry out. If Tim didn't look above the neck and ignored how grey Luke's palms had gone, he could almost pretend he was sleeping. But that's all it would be, pretend, because Luke didn't sleep stretched out, he slept curled up like a little bug trying to protect his vital organs and preserve heat. For all the good that had done, in the end.

Tim hadn't been able to protect him. No matter what he'd tried when he'd been sixteen and half out of his mind with loss, death wasn't a problem to be solved.

So he didn't fight when the stretcher wheeled away to a part of the clinic Tim mostly visited for cases. Didn't protest, didn't try to keep Luke on hand while he *figured this out*. There was nothing to figure out. He just watched.

Left to his own devices, Tim might have stood there until the ceiling collapsed, but a light touch to one shoulder dragged him back to the present and every ache and pain that he's sidelined in favour of his guilt.

Batman was still there for some reason, lingering.

Tim wasn't clear on why, to be entirely honest. Robin had probably had a pretty rough night, and between the kids and Hellfern and Deadshot, Bruce really ought to still be out there and working not in here doing... Whatever this was. Surely there was something better he could be doing with his time.

But the touch hadn't been from the kevlar elephant in the room, it had been from the person who actually worked here. The receptionist was clearly looking to get back to their post sooner rather than later, which was fair. Leaving the front desk unattended was asking for someone to die on their floor and Tim couldn't be responsible for another tragedy today. Just couldn't.

So he took the hint and made his way towards the double doors, keeping his breathing shallow to try not to aggravate the burn in his lungs. Talk about deja vu. Maybe Tim was just unable to breathe properly in this building.

After all, one day Stephanie would die here.

Not that Tim can let that matter in the face of all of the things wrong here right *now*. The dead and the injured and Tim himself, who maybe if he hadn't interfered with the Riddler's trap tonight might not have gotten a little boy killed.

He was pointed to an exam room, not the one he'd been in last time he was here, but one nearly identical. Tim couldn't bring himself to feel much of anything about that. Mostly the cream walls just made him numb.

Somewhere overhead, hissing through the vents, a fan rattled ever so quietly. White noise that wasn't quite what it was supposed to be.

In the corner, Batman stood. Waiting. For what, Tim honestly had no idea. There was nothing to say, not really, for all that Bruce must have questions. For better or for worse, this situation was fairly self evident, all things Bruce could piece together from the comfort of his own Cave. What was he hoping to gain by hanging around? What was there left to learn?

Besides the fundamental truth that Tim wasn't supposed to be here, at least.

"It wasn't your fault."

Tim flicked his gaze from where he'd fixed it on an older looking scratch in the paint. "I don't think you're in any position to lecture me about guilt."

Batman's head tipped and he took on that particular stillness that was half-threat and half-intrigue meant Tim had fucked up somehow, meant he was trapped in a room with a Bat who was suddenly an entirely different kind ofinterested in what he had to say. And Tim didn't have anything resembling a filter or a single fuck to give.

Before Tim could even make a passing attempt to play off how pointed a dig that had been, maybe say something that would incriminate him as knowing things about vigilantism but might hide his personal experience with the altar of perpetual penance that was Bruce Wayne's life, the door opened and Leslie Thompkins swept into the room.

"No, absolutely not," she said it like it was an immutable truth, and whatever metal was left in Tim's spine, the ball of weight that had settled in his lower back, unwound until his shoulders steadied a little.

Only took a lifetime and a half, but there was finally a competent adult in the room.

"Doctor Thompkins," Batman started, tone still precise but more like ink ran along a ruler than strokes of graphite.

Leslie wasn't having any of it. "Absolutely not. I will not have vigilantes loitering in my clinic. The boys are here. Unless you intend to arrest him, you've done your part, *Batman*. Now leave."

For a moment Tim wasn't sure he was going to. Watched the minute shift in his cape that indicated he was glancing around behind the whiteout lenses and thought maybe he'd make a case for staying. Tim didn't know how to feel about that. For all that he wanted so *badly* for his dad to make this better, the awkward distance he'd been allowed since the alley made it gut wrenchingly obvious that this wasn't his dad. Pretending otherwise was a waste of everyone's time and an insult to his real kid and to all of Tim's own responsibilities.

Not that he'd done a great job handling any of those, and not that Tim's feelings on it seemed to matter in the end, because after a long moment filled with static and steel and a long look Tim didn't have the space to interpret, Batman moved to the door and sidled past Leslie. She tracked him as he left and it wasn't until the door had closed behind him that she turned back to Tim.

"Mister Draper. I thought I had made myself fairly clear last time you were here." For all that the words were sharp, their points just slid off of him. When he didn't respond beyond a shrug, her careful professionalism turned into a frown. "Well let's take a look at you. What are your injuries?"

Tim wet his lips. Tasted the blood between his cracked skin, and tried to drag the world back into focus. She just needed a status report. He could do that. "Minor but prolonged electric shock through the hands. Some scattered bruising. Bullet graze to my left lateral abdomen. Limited exposure to Joker Venom. Burns and smoke inhalation from earlier today. Nothing I can't handle myself. I'm mostly just tired."

Leslie seemed to disagree, already snapping gloves on and pulling out supplies. “Any treatment thus far?”

Less confident with his thought moving slow and thick, Tim listed the limited help he’d allowed himself from the paramedics and the basics of his various attempts at field dressings. She’d see the latter in a minute and Tim was sure she’d notice a half dozen details he didn’t mention regardless.

The first touch of the nitrile gloves was just cold enough to drag Tim a little closer to the edge of the bubble he was trying so hard to maintain, but it was the touches after that, when the good Doctor had cut away his tunic with a pair of ceramic scissors and peeled back his taped on gauze that sent a stabbing chill right through him.

Despite himself, Tim’s vision blurred. Before the sting even registered, the tears overflowed and at first Tim thought a tire somewhere had been stabbed, but no that high keening noise was coming from him and Tim didn’t have the faintest idea how to stop it.

All he could do was shake and gasp for breath, waiting for the other side of a wave that never seemed to end.

This was his fault. His mistake. His arrogance and confidence and *carelessness* , and now a kid was dead. In another room, not too far from here, another kid was *hurt* and that was his fault too for not being there sooner. He had said he’d take care of them.

Apparently he'd lied.

It wasn't anything in particular that brought Tim back to his own skin, but eventually he became aware of hands on his shoulders. Small, strong, and smelling notably of disinfectant. Leslie.

She was talking, and Tim forced himself to listen to the words. "You're not going to believe me, you types never do, but that child's death was not your fault. You made sure he didn't die alone, and sometimes that's all you can do. The problem wasn't that little boy getting caught, and it wasn't you not being good enough, the problem was a psychopath with his own custom chemical weapon. Don't forget that."

If Tim had been in the mood for being placated, that would have done a good job, but something in her words, something in the way she picked apart the *problem* sparked a flare of anger in his chest and Tim didn't have the wherewithal to stop it. "With all due respect, *doc*, I don't really want to hear about how there was nothing I could have done. The whole point is that there's always something to try. Always a chance. Just because I failed doesn't mean it had to be like that. Doesn't mean Luke didn't deserve better."

"Get over yourself." Leslie didn't quite snap, but she wasn't gentle. "Something terrible happened to a little boy, and you couldn't stop it. Don't you dare disrespect the memory of a child who trusted you by making his death about you."

Tim wanted to scream. This had to be some deeply cruel joke by

whatever had launched him into the past in the first place. He had never wanted to understand this part of Bruce.

There was nothing Tim could really say to the kind of argument he had once staked his entire life on, no matter how little he could agree when he was on this end of it. At least, nothing that wouldn't be it's own kind of knife in his gut. "Please hurry up. I want to go home."

Leslie's lips thinned, but she took her hands from his shoulders and got back to work. The next few minutes passed in a tense and moderately painful silence, with Tim doing his best to regulate his breathing and block out the creeping tendrils of grief that tried again and again to crush his chest.

He wasn't all that successful.

When Leslie finally stepped away, stripping her gloves as she went, Tim was more than a little lightheaded. Everything hurt, and he sort of wanted to pull his lungs up out of his mouth to get a better look at what was wrong with them, but that wasn't really an option if he wanted to get out of here any time soon. And he did, damn near more than anything else at the moment, so he kept his mouth shut and counted his breaths.

Leslie gave him a clipped set of instructions to take care of his injuries and his options for dressing changes that he mostly ignored beyond their applicability as advice for other people. He could handle his own injuries.

It wasn't until the exam room door clicked shut behind him that Tim remembered again that there was something more important than how much he wanted to go to sleep for a week. A promise he still had the chance to keep.

Jason.

He had promised more than just safety to Jason, he'd promised a *home*, and he was somewhere in this building waiting for Tim to follow through.

Tim could sleep when he was dead.

Not that he actually knew where specifically Jason was, but Tim couldn't care less about poking his head into room after room until he found his chipmunk curled up under thin sheets. His first thought was that Jason was asleep, but the boy twisted around to look at the door when it opened and his face lit up when he saw Tim, only for his grin to slide away when he got a better look at him.

"What happened to *you*? Did you decide that one burning building wasn't enough or what?" The concern was obvious, and there was a touch of something that might have been anxiety or Tim's imagination, but what stood out the most was the way that even still sick, *poisoned* the black pit at the base of Tim's skull hissed, and weak from smoke inhalation, Jason was practically climbing out of bed to get a better look at Tim.

“Or something,” Tim grimaced, making his way over gingerly until he could sit at the foot of Jason’s bed. “Beat up a chemist, got a little bit shot, little bit electrocuted, and then I fucked up.”

Jason blinked slowly just the once, but it was the only real sign of surprise. Maybe he was too tired for shock as well. “Well what did you do? Whatever it is, we can probably think of something to do about it. Two heads are better than one, right? And if we’re not enough we can get Luke and the girls in on it too.”

“Luke is dead.”

Saying it like that was a mistake, Tim knew even as he said it, but the truth of it was acid in his mouth and he couldn’t keep it to himself.

“What?” Jason’s voice was small and he’d gone so pale so quickly Tim was a little worried he might pass out. “What do you mean he’s *dead*, what happened?”

Tim closed his eyes. He owed both Jason and Luke more than this, but he couldn’t look at him when he realized what Tim had let happen. “He got kidnapped. Stupid plot from the Riddler. I handled it, but the ambulance that came to check out the kids was a fake. Everyone else hid, but Luke got grabbed. It was the Joker.”

Really, that was everything he needed to say. Jason could fill in whatever blanks he wanted, and Tim wasn’t going to give him any more details for his nightmares. Somewhere nearby, a television was

running an ad for toothpaste Tim remembered watching as a kid.

"And where were you?" Jason demanded, like it was obvious that if Tim had been there it never would have happened. Like the only reason this could have happened was because Tim hadn't been where he was supposed to be.

And to be fair, he was right. "I was keeping the Riddler busy. Thought the ambulance would keep them safe. I was wrong."

"That's it?" Jason snarled, and then it was the darkness that Tim couldn't stand. When he opened his eyes he was only barely surprised to see Jason's face twisted in anger, white-knuckling the bed railing. "He trusted you to keep him safe, you *promised* to take care of him! And now he's dead because you were *wrong*?"

"Yeah, that about covers it. I fucked up, Jason, and I can't undo that no matter how sorry I am." Tim tried to say it right, tried to get his point across in a way that wouldn't hurt, but the effort was like pulling teeth and every word just seemed to piss Jason off more. "I'm going to go up front and get you discharged, and once we're home you can be as mad at me as you want."

"Your shitty apartment isn't my home!"

Tim's first thought was that the words shouldn't have hurt. Of course his hole in the wall wasn't home to Jason. It wasn't home to anyone, not even really Tim. There was no reason for him to feel like his

already hollow heart had been carved out of his chest.

His second thought was that Jason needed a kind of gentleness Tim didn't have right now. Didn't mean he got to stoptrying. "Your mom asked me to keep an eye on you while she found you guys another place to stay. It doesn't have to be home, but it's a roof over your head, okay?"

Jason's lip curled and he swayed slightly. "I can stay at the safe house."

It was a trap. Waiting for Tim to deny him the safety and the freedom he'd asked for help building. He could either go back on everything he'd tried to build into their relationship to keep Jason safer, or he could take a step back and pray his inaction didn't kill another kid. For any other kid, it wouldn't even be a question. Tim could take a little hatred if it saved their life. But with Jason, shoving him in a box and waiting for him to fall in line was never going to work. Especially not when Tim had broken one promise already.

As far as ultimatums went, it ought to be a weak one. Jason had him in a corner anyways. Maybe Tim was a coward, but he didn't think he could take betraying Jason twice in an hour.

So he bent. It felt like it was that or break. "You can, if that's what you want. But I'll drop you off, and I'm asking you to check in with Maggie every couple of days. My door will always be open if you want it."

By the way Jason's face crumpled, he'd gotten at least one thing right, and the tears shouldn't have been a relief but at least it meant that Jason hadn't shut him out entirely. Half-sure he'd get shoved away, Tim scooched over and opened an arm. Jason ignored him for a moment that felt like burning, curled over himself like maybe everything would go away if he didn't look at it. Tim knew the feeling.

Every breath hurt, his side ached, and Tim was pretty sure that if he didn't get somewhere quiet soon, away from the beeping and the heavy air conditioning and the incessant buzzing of lights that was burrowing into his bones, he was going to start breaking things. Possibly many things. Possibly himself.

But he could wait a little bit longer, if Jason needed it. All the peace had been drained out of him drop by drop, but he could pretend otherwise, at least for a while yet.

Leslie had been right about one thing; Luke's death wasn't about Tim. Everyone who knew him would be hurting, and at least Tim already had plenty of experience in grief and guilt. Really, he should have seen the loss coming. Wasn't this exactly how it always went? Tim did his best, he made every choice to help as many people as possible, and for a while it would be enough. Until it wasn't and something Tim couldn't have seen coming or couldn't fight killed someone he loved. Again.

Their deaths were never about Tim, he was just the one who had to live with them.

And today, here and now rather than the nebulous future and home

Tim missed so badly, Jason had to live with that too.

Jason sobbed, audibly and painfully like there was glass in his eyes and throat, and then he twisted again to shove his blotchy face into Tim's shoulder, a wiry arm wrapping around his torso like he was scared he'd disappear out from under him. Carefully and awkwardly, his side tugging uncomfortably with the movement, Tim wrapped him in a half-hug. He didn't try to stop his own tears when his own vision blurred again.

They stayed there until Jason cried himself dry, and then a while after that too.

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By the time Tim left the clinic, it was light out again and, hopefully, Batman had been forced to go do his actual day job or at least leave Tim alone for a bit. Jason hadn't been entirely happy about coming with him, but he'd agreed to so long as he could immediately go hide at Maggie's. The request was both a kick in the teeth and exactly what Tim had expected.

Either way, he wasn't happy about it.

Maybe, in the worst kind of way, it was for the best that Jason wanted space, at least at the beginning, because Tim wasn't sure he was really in any position to care for a kid who was hurting. He was barely in a position to care for himself. If it wasn't for Redbird needing to go

outside regularly, Tim might not have left his apartment at all for far too long.

There was always going to be a part of Tim that wanted to curl up in a closet and never come back out. It had been there for years, softly crying for rest and peace and to bury his head so far in the sand he'd drown, but life continued and he could either get up or let his grief eat him alive. Only one of those options would make things better for anyone.

Which wasn't really a choice.

So even though Tim wanted to sit on his kitchen floor until he stopped expecting to see a little body curled up in his armchair, he went back over his to-do list and got to work.

The first couple of shelters were up and running, but with Luke's death he had lost most of the trust any of the kids had in him. Oh sure Layla still came around to chatter at him and play with Redbird, but Marlene had quietly and pointedly started coordinating the supply drops and check-ins herself, using his name to get the local store owners to play along. Tim probably should have stepped in, but the whole point of this had always been to make something self-sufficient, something that made them feel *safe*, and if he no longer did that then maybe everyone was better off if he kept his nose out of it. He'd already proven himself incapable of best judging the use of valuable resources once, what right did he have to tell these kids how to use the supplies that could save their lives?

Didn't make it feel any less like yet another failure to take care of his kids, though.

What did need his attention, however, was his medication project. It had been long enough for him to go confirm the deal with pharmacists, at which point he could really get to work. His techs at the warehouse had been working on a starting supply, and while a week of production really wasn't much in the way of stores, it was better than starting with nothing and so long as Vivian agreed, it would help things take off on the right foot.

Unlike last time he'd made the trek out to the pharmacy, it hadn't managed to start raining. There was a promise of it in the air, all electric humidity and too-still air, but they ought to have a few hours yet, and Tim would make the most of them before he was trapped in his apartment again with only his thoughts and the kids across the hall who couldn't rely on him.

Just about anything was better than that.

Including but not limited to walking into a pharmacy about thirty seconds before closing, knowing full well that he was going to look like one of *those* guys. The kind to stay thirty minutes after the doors were supposed to be locked and who threw off every poor person on shift for the day's entire evening plans off.

If Tim was lucky, it'd just be Vivian and it wouldn't waste anyone else's time. Then again, if Tim had a single scrap of luck left, he wouldn't be here. If Tim had any luck at all, Luke would be alive.

This couldn't be about luck.

Maybe it was proof that Tim's life was a cosmic joke of some sort or maybe it was just the natural result of having agreed to visit again a specific length of time later, but when Tim walked in, Vivian was the one behind the counter.

"Wasn't sure you were coming back," she said before the door had even closed behind him. Tim bit down on the annoyance that spiked until he tasted copper.

He used the walk to the counter as an excuse to swallow the blood and pull to the surface anything resembling a calm human response. He shrugged and did his best to roll some of the concrete out of his shoulders."I'm not the kind of guy to walk away from an investment."

"Is that what this is to you," Vivian raised an eyebrow. She had one hand on the counter and the other was out of sight. Tim wondered if her hand was empty, if it was clenched. "An investment?"

During their last conversation, Tim had done his very best to balance his genuine belief in what he was trying to get done with a callousness to avoid letting Vivian see even a scrap of desperation. Now, all the want had drained out of him to pool in his feet, and Tim couldn't really care if she saw what he wanted out of this. Couldn't really care about anything but getting the job done.

Getting *anything* done.

“Yes, this is an investment. As it turns out, just about everything is an investment. Talk today, survive tomorrow.” Tim propped his elbows on the counter between them, leaning into it just a little. Held eye contact. “So how about it, are we gonna talk?”

Vivian took a half step back, reaching under the counter and pulling out the dufflebag Tim had delivered his samples in. The coolers hit the laminate through the fabric with a quiet clunk. “I’ve assessed your product. Can you guarantee consistency?”

What she wasn’t saying but oh so clearly meant, was that the medication was good. To her, the only question was whether Tim could maintain the quality. A fair question, and to be entirely honest Tim wasn’t sure about that himself. He wasn’t really sure about all that much these days. All he was sure about was that he had to do *something*.

And either way, Vivian didn’t need to hear any of that. What she needed to hear was easy, all confidence and optimism and the kind of lie that Tim could tell like a heartbeat. It was the kind of lie that would sit and warm and comforting in her belly and it would get him that yes that he needed so, so badly.

Instead, Tim told the truth.

“I wouldn’t come looking to sell subpar anything, and certainly not something as important as this. I told you the first time around, I want a sustainable market. I want people to stop struggling to afford things that should be free anyways and spending that money in their

community instead. I want this goddamn town to get *better*, and I'm sick of how much arbitrary bullshit is in the way of that. I want people *alive*." Every word was lemon juice on ulcers, capsaicin in his eyes, was candy so sour it stripped the skin from his tongue, and Tim barely kept himself from continuing, from spilling every black thought of *progress* that was curling in the back of his throat.

Vivian stared at him for a moment, silent and sharp. And then, "You're not in this for the money."

Tim wanted to laugh but he wasn't confident that the noise that came out would sound human. He tried to smile instead, but it was only skin and teeth. "I've never been in anything for the money. Not even when I was trying to make money."

"The drugs will work." It wasn't a question so Tim didn't bother answering. "And you don't really care about the profit beyond, what expanding your market?"

That one was a question, so Tim tipped his head and see-sawed a hand back and forth. "I want to make enough money to sustain this venture, to expand, and to support my other projects. But that's about it."

"Other projects," she said flatly, and Tim raised an eyebrow. The safe houses weren't really her business. Something on his face pushed her into taking another step back. "You're not looking to live off of this. You just want it to work."

Tim let her go, even as she moved farther and farther, tracing a path into the back of the shop and the screaming thing in his chest he was ignoring shrieked. If he wanted to, Tim could catch her quickly enough. Hurdle the counter, jump the low shelf, dodge the tall one, five, six, seven steps and if he did it quiet enough she wouldn't even hear it coming.

He stayed where he was, waiting.

Eventually, Vivian came back and she was carrying a small black bag and a binder. They met the counter with their own *thunk*. "This is every recipe I have ever worked with. Notes on granulation, tablet pressing, the most common dosages and anything else that came to mind since I was twenty-two and sleeping four hours a night. I'll be wanting it back."

The cover of the binder was scuffed and worn, but clean. Maintained and regularly used. It was an awful lot of trust and Tim wasn't entirely sure he'd earned it. He *certainly* hadn't really earned what a quick glance into the bag told him was a more than generous start up fee.

But he'd take what he could get, and he'd run with it. At least this, he could do.

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Meeting with Jones had been easier than Vivian.

Oh, Tim was sure he hadn't quite hit the notes he wanted to, too much simmering anger that he wasn't looking at, and a little bit more business than he'd wanted to be with Jones these days, but Jones had seemed more thoughtful than offended and he'd had a fairly well-constructed internal structuring and task allocation plan that Tim had greenlit to start up production on a more permanent scale.

Jones had even been amenable to assisting with delivery through the sewers on the understanding it was only temporary until the runners Tim has politely threatened and then bribed into the gig learned the routes.

A net win, and even if Tim was still knee-deep in questions he didn't want to ask and problems he didn't want to know the solutions to, he could go through the motions of celebration anyways. Might be a chance to see the kids, if nothing else.

Celebration meant pizza, and pizza meant the Vecellios'. Tim was overdue for a visit anyways. He'd been putting it off because while neither Vivian nor Jones had known Luke, the same couldn't be said for Sam, and Tim hadn't want to face yet another person's grief. Hadn't wanted to have to say it again.

It was possible by now they'd already heard it from someone else, but they deserved to hear it from Tim too. At the very least, he owed Sam a couple of favours and she was going to need a good reason to believe that he was good for them. All he had to do was seem like he had his shit together. Couldn't be that hard, he'd been doing that for years. What was one more day?

The bell over the door tinkled exactly the same way it always had, and with Redbird on his heels Tim half-expected Luke to run past him to perch on the counter despite himself.

And apparently he wasn't the only one.

"Afternoon, Draper and dog," Sam called, not looking up from the magazine she was leafing through, and scribbling out an order ticket one-handed. Tim could see the loops and spikes of her writing out 'artichoke.' Softie. "Where's your little shadow?"

Well at least he didn't have to bring it up, even if the question sort of made Tim want to walk back out and climb a building or fifteen. "Luke is-" No. Wrong start. Luke *was* , past tense. The distinction was important. "Luke won't be coming around anymore."

Sam's head snapped up and she straightened out of her slouch. "What're you talking about? Did CPS catch him? There's gotta be something you can do about that, a bribe or two and you could be a foster parent, you could find him-"

"He's dead, Sam. Joker got him." Tim pushed out a breath and pushed through. Sam stared at him for half a beat and then turned sharply around, a hand pressed to her mouth. "I'm trying to get the rights for a funeral and Doc Leslie has him at the clinic, but there's no way the paperwork is going through in time and even if it does there's not a chance in hell they'll award me power of executor. I'll figure something out, and when I do you'll be invited, okay?"

“And what are you going to do?” Her voice was tight, her eyes were red, and her hand and teeth were bloodied. Tim blinked at her snarl, mouth already opening to give the least illegal version of his incredibly vague plans, but she wasn’t done. “Not about Luke. What are you going to do about the son of a bitch who killed him?”

That stopped him dead. From behind his ribs, the seething shadowed *thing* that Tim had been starving since Luke had gone cool in his arms *shrieked.*

What was Tim doing about-

Tim choked the thought into silence, pressing its toothy maw deep into its own wretched belly. The last time he’d done something about someone who’d made him angry, it had cost a kid his life.

“I’m leaving that one to the professionals,” he said coolly, tucking his hands into his jacket pockets to hide the way they curled into fists. Tim knew what he needed to say, even if the words tasted like shame and ashes. “I’ve got a lot of tricks up my sleeve, but he’s a little above my weight class. I tried to save Luke. It wasn’t enough.”

A scoff. Not what he expected, though maybe he deserved it. “Don’t make excuses for yourself. You decide when you’re done, not anyone else. Not the mob, not the cops, and sure as shit not that clown. You promised to look after him and someone killed him. Maybe you could have stopped it, maybe not. But you tell me the truth, Alvin. Does Luke’s death mean you’re done?”

That was a low blow and Sam had to be doing it on purpose. She was angry, and rightly so, but that didn't give her the fucking right to say Tim was *quitting*.

"I'm not *done*," Tim spat. He'd known how this worked for years- Tim didn't *get* to quit.

For a long moment they both stalled there, Sam with her own blood on her lips, waiting for something, and Tim swallowing every drop of venom that tried to slither out between his teeth.

Before Tim could make a decision to break it, though he had know idea where he could possibly have gone from there, Sam's grandmother stepped out from the back, two pizza boxes and a little paper bag in hand.

"And what seems to have you both up in arms, hm? Has this young man overstayed his welcome?" Her tone was light, but she'd never quite lost her sharp suspicion around Tim. He knew from the chipmunks that she had a tendency to pack them extra garlic knots, but every time he came around she watched him like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe this was finally the shoe.

Sam shook her head, but she didn't break eye contact with Tim. "No, nonna. He was just leaving. Draper has something else he has to deal with, right?"

There wasn't a right answer to that question, and there wasn't a right answer to the question she wanted to ask and he *still wasn't asking*. All that was left was a tactical retreat before he burned bridges with someone he owed and his favourite pizza place.

So Tim turned away first, dropping the payment and tip he'd memorized after the second order on the counter and retrieving his food from the elder Vecellio. Any other time he might have tried a charming grin on the way out, but Tim couldn't be sure it wouldn't come out a grimace so he gave her a nod instead.

Sam's judgment followed him out the door and into the night.

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Tim sat at a corner table in *My Alibi* nursing a glass of ginger ale. He hadn't bothered pretending to want a beer this time, too invested in getting something, *anything,* in hand so he could focus on it rather than the black well of his own thoughts and the question he refused to ask himself.

What could- The glass was cold, half ice, really, but the condensation was slick against his palm and the hiss of the carbonation were both tangible in a way Tim clung to.

None of the patrons were any more respectable than last time he'd

been here, though in the part of his brain that still gave a damn he was pretty sure he recognized a handful of voices from his hours of surveillance. The pair playing darts barely six feet away from him, for example, were regulars.

"All I'm saying," one was saying, grip loose, leaving the nose of the dart bobbing. "Is that while a job is a job, not all jobs are *just* jobs, y'know?"

The other squinted at his friend. He was named something like Harry, Tim thought. If he really thought about it, it would probably come to him, but Tim couldn't delve too far into his own head right now. "What about standing around and waiting to get dropped by the fucking Bat for shit pay is a passion to you? The broken arms or the fucking brain damage?"

"No, no," the first waved his hand again, the dart weaving drunkenly through the air before he lined up for a throw. Mediocre form, but Tim had seen worse. "I don't mean in a good way. Some jobs are just pay, right? Show up, maybe rough some shmucks up or whatever, but others fucking follow you home. Say what you will about how he handles business, but at least Two Face isn't gonna poison your fucking water line because he didn't like your shoes that day."

"You still going on about what happened to Francis?" the one who probably wasn't Harry asked, a hint of resignation in his tone even as his head twitched towards the rest of the room, as if resisting the urge to glance around.

The throw went wide. He'd clearly been going for the inner ring of the sixteen and gotten the outer edge of the eight instead. Probably for the

best he hadn't been going for the twenty.

"Yes I'm still going on about it!" Maybe-Harry snarled, slamming a hand onto their side table. "It was fucked, Ian. All Franky fucking did was ask someone to explain the joke, you *know* he doesn't do so good with word play, and the very next day he, his wife, and his kids were all laughing themselves to death in their own goddamn apartment. Not to mention the rest of the poor fucks in their building who got caught up in the fire from their stove they couldn't turn off. Getting stupid fucking puns isn't supposed to be part of the job."

"Well neither is getting jumped in an alley for talking shit," Apparently-Ian hissed. "We've still gotta make a living, and you can't talk like that in a joint like this. Not about *him*."

Him. Even without the context Tim could have guessed who they were talking about from the tone alone. Disgust, fear, and the specific kind of reverence the worst of the worst in Gotham got.

What could Tim-

Schrodinger's Harry picked up another dart. "And that's just my fucking point. What kind of boss can't you bitch about over drinks with a buddy, huh?"

"The kind who knows where you fucking live and ain't afraid to burn your goddamn house down," Ian said sourly before taking a swig from his own drink. "I get it, I do, but it's not like I can just fucking quit.

Joker don't take too kindly to turncoats and since Margie got sick we need the extra cash from the night work. Can't just stop, can't work for someone else. I'm hoping next time he goes away for a while I can pick up something else and maybe if I keep my head down, only take guard shifts whenever I can, he'll forget about me."

A scoff, and Tim agreed. "Not fucking likely."

Ian looked at his drink, knuckles pale around the glass and skin tight around his mouth. "No, not fucking likely at all. But I've gotta try."

That, more than anything else, seemed to quiet his companion even as it turned the buzzing in Tim's head into an uproar.

Gotham had a monster problem, even back here and now in a city that had seemed so much lighter than Tim had known it. No, not seemed- this Gotham *was* still lighter than it one day would be, even if Tim couldn't see anything but the teeth in its maw. From the pizza parlour to his own little warehouse of tricks, the people here had so much more of a chance than most people would after the Quake, but everyone lived in fear of the people trying to run the show. The Ibanescus. Cobblepot.

The Joker.

Not-Harry lined up another throw, and Tim stopped pretending not to watch. Weight distribution, stance, wrist tension, watching all of it because if he ran enough analysis he didn't have to think about-

Ping .

The dart didn't even sink into the old cork this time, bouncing sharply off a the metal rim and sending it spinning through the air. Tim tracked the flickering arc, and on an impulse that lived somewhere in they belly of an apartment in Bludhaven that might not have been built yet, he snapped a hand out to pluck it from its path.

Boots were on throats, both literal and metaphorical, but there was a little breathing room yet. Enough to scream. Enough to struggle.

His fingertips were still wet and a little numb from the glass, but Tim would be long dead if he let that kind of thing stop him from doing the job what was in front of him. The weight of the dart was familiar, surprisingly well-balanced given the state of the board.

With a point in hand, Tim had a lot of options.

But the threat remained- Gotham had a monster problem. And if left unchecked, it would do its damnedest to swallow everyone and everything that lived here. Which really only left one question, the same question Tim had come here to drown out.

What could Tim do about a problem like the Joker?

Chapter End Notes

:)

I honestly am not sure I even have words for how I'm feeling. Sure there's the epilogue, but this is the story! That right there is what I've been working to this whole time!!! I took an idea and I wrote it to completion!! I'm so pleased. Sure there's stuff I might tweak, some additional foreshadowing I might go back and add, but still!

The epilogue is, in contrast to the last three chapters, not finished but it'll handle the last couple of things I want to address in this fic. Namely both the Thing and a little more info about wtf Joker was about with the ambulance thing since Tim has thus far not been in a headspace to investigate and was too out of the loop of Gotham crime politics to see it ahead of time. It'll come out as most of the chapters thus far have, which is to say whenever it gets done

For anyone wondering about loose ends; Nygma, the favours Tim owes Sam, what Exactly was Jones thinking about there when Tim came in looking haggard and grief stricken and deeply Deeply angry, well. All of that's stuff I'm planning to deal with in the sequel other POV fic. I know its a little unprofessional to deliberately leave plot threads hanging for that sort of thing, but bite me, I'm an amateur for a reason :p

Anyways, thank you all for giving this fic a shot, sticking around, and very often giving it the grace needed for it to do what it was intended to! I genuinely couldn't have asked for a better audience to share this with and writing this over the last few years has meant so much to me.

As always, thanks for reading and I hope you all have a wonderful week <3333

Chapter 33: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> Some more content warnings for this one, also spoilery so check the Notes at the bottom if you feel the need! Nothing new exactly, but some of the descriptions get a little more graphic than most of the fic.
>
> <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not for the first time in the last few months, Bruce was sure he was missing something.

When it came to Alvin Draper, there were more things that didn't make sense than things that did. He was self-employed as a software engineer who primarily offered his services to local businesses. He had bought multiple properties in and around Park Row. His father was dead and had given him a ring that likely didn't exist, and he seemed to have no family beyond the one he was building for himself on the streets. Upon inquiry, Alvin Draper seemed to have all the right paperwork, records, and mannerisms to be a Gotham native, and not a single person who had known him a year ago.

For all intents and purposes, Alvin seemed to be a complete and fully established person who had walked out of a sewer one day and carried on like he'd always been there.

On its own, that mystery would have been enough to catch Bruce's interest, but that was without even touching Alvin's personality. No number of prickly but toothless jabs had been able to hide the *longing* that Alvin seemed to wear like a coat, and the way he seemed to use that pain as a tool has called to the nest of grief that lived behind Bruce's ribs and he hadn't been able to ignore it.

He didn't know quite what it was Alvin was aching for, though he was confident it had something to do with his not-entirely-false father and the way he seemed to build bonds like breathing. Alvin hadn't always been this alone.

Which made the question of what had happened to his previous network all the more glaring. Where had he *been*?

There was also the incident the other night to consider.

Every patrol carried its own frantic energy, its own crises and opportunities for loss, but it had been a while since any of them had cracked open the furrow of fear in Bruce's chest like hearing a gunshot echo across a hissing phone line.

His desperation to get to the scene as fast as possible had left him entirely unprepared for the bleeding, young, *competent* vigilante he'd come face to face with on that rooftop. One question answered and a thousand more unfurled. Alvin was a thief and a liar with no small amount of training.

Alvin had sounded so honestly *afraid* when he had thought he was talking to Matches.

The dichotomy had left Bruce just off-balance enough to swept quite

literally off his feet, and by the time he had retrieved his car and his fuming son, Alvin had once again been in the wind. Whether the gamble to leave behind a job to do was calculated or an act of desperation, it had been an effective way to tie his hands for at least an hour. One dangerous but defeated criminal Batman could leave to Robin, but two? No. He had to stay until they were in custody.

By the time everything had been wrapped up and Robin had been sent home for the night, Bruce had been just in time to track down a fresh tragedy.

A dead child and another painting himself in guilt.

All Bruce could offer was empty absolution and a ride. He'd wanted to do so much more, to take Alvin's hand and let him squeeze until either the numbness or the bones broke. Whichever came first.

Here and now, after the fact and after following Alvin home yet again in the pale morning light, it was a connection Bruce wanted to take hold of, even without Alvin reaching back, but couldn't settle on a vector of approach. Was he Matches, who Alvin had already turned to for help once and trusted at least with his own crimes? Was he Batman, who Alvin had opened up to, just a little, but had ultimately ran from? Was he *Bruce*, out of place and out of pocket but kind and honest in a way he didn't often allow himself to be?

Each and one of them had their own advantages and disadvantages, and despite himself Bruce couldn't seem to *choose*. Selfishly, he wanted to appease some of the hunger that haunted Alvin, and his gut told him that if his next approach didn't go well the boy may very well slip through his fingers entirely and disappear back into whatever

spawning pit he'd climbed out of.

The thought was absurd. For all that Alvin was decent enough at avoiding people in the moment, he hadn't done a particularly good job hiding his footprint on the city, and was therefore fairly straightforward to track down.

But Bruce was still unwilling to make his next attempt at drawing Alvin closer anything less than perfect.

Across half a dozen monitors and twice that in windows, Bruce went over his options again. Maybe this time, with half of the files flipped backwards and the other half in reverse order, he'd see something to tip the scales, something he hadn't-

A peripheral screen, one relegated to a mosaic of news networks off to the left, flickered once and then again as a subroutine moved one of its feeds onto the main monitor in response to foreign interference with a broadcast.

Before the image resolved, Bruce was already through his backdoor into the Gotham City News Network, even as he knew the odds of them having anything close to the sophistication of software that would make his job easy. Still it was able to indicate that the broadcast was *supposedly* coming from the correct tower, suggesting either a manual splice or someone who knew a thing or two about duping the in-house location data.

Which, judging from the artifact-ridden footage taking form in place of the evening sports segment, seemed unlikely.

On the other hand, the bleach-white skin and rancid green hair made it a toss up. Always hard to tell with the Joker whether something was a mistake or a taunt. Most likely, there was something he found humorous about it, though that didn't entirely eliminate the possibility it could be used to find him.

And after the latest in his ever-growing list of casualties, Batman very much wanted to *find him*.

Whatever microphone the Joker was using couldn't be high quality, not with the way his laughter warped and crackled, but that could have been a choice as well. Maybe the warping was a result of the seemingly large space he was in. The shadows and looming boxes marked it as in use for storage of some kind, but it could have been a dedicated warehouse or just an adapted room. Shafts of moonlight from an unseen skylight lent more towards warehouse, but still not concrete.

The distorted maker's marks Bruce could see indicated explosives, which narrowed down the options if this place was in any way on record. Not a guarantee, but a start.

"Good evening, Gotham City!" Joker stretched the vowels like taffy. "I'm sure you were all expecting a quiet Wednesday in, maybe a little wine, maybe some oh so tragic soaps, but have I got a show for you instead!"

Acquiring this quantity of hazardous material without raising any flags wasn't possible, though once it was in the city tracking it specifically got a great deal harder. At the very least, an initial sweep of the last month's shipping records suggested this either must have been in the works for a while or potentially the raw materials had been imported and assembled here.

Not a dead-end, but unlikely to find the Joker's whereabouts quickly.

Though that might not be the first order of the night, if he had something prepared that he wanted to *share* with the Gotham public.

"Now you may not be aware," Joker leaned forward conspiratorially, eyes bloodshot and wide, teeth gleaming. "But our lovely cesspit of a city is actually ahead of the national average in ambulances per capita. Sure they're out there with more than a few empty drawers, but there's still more on the streets than in any other major city on the east coast!"

Dick ought to be nearly done with his homework and in all likelihood was grabbing a snack before coming down to the Cave to finish. They could be out the door and on their way to intervene with *whatever* this was in less than ten minutes if they hustled. And if this was going where Bruce thought it was, and already he was hacking into the local EMS command centres for their live data, they'd need all hands on deck and all boots on the ground.

Metaphorically.

Joker swept an arm wide and tilted sideways, revealing a three and a half foot bundle of plastic explosives. Bruce cranked the volume high enough to carry across the Cave and started gearing up. “Since I’m such a community-minded and compassionate soul, I’ve decided that for one night only, I’ll be filling every hole in their budget with my very own medical miracle! Sure it might punch a few new holes in Gotham and her patients but,” a wriggling shrug that oozed razor-wire glee, “Any job’s got its hazards and everything we do in this city is with a *bang*.”

Batman wasn’t really listening to the footsteps coming down the metal stairs, too busy drafting possible paths to intercept as many ambulance routes as quickly as possible. Robin was fairly adept at disarming explosives, but Batman would still prefer if he focused on evacuation over high-stakes disposal for a few years yet, which would require either they stick together or Robin would often be stuck waiting for a bomb squad.

That might not be an option, depending on how the night ahead went.

Another laugh, the kind that itched across skin like dried blood, as Batman clicked his bracers into place. Dick had picked up on his urgency, and was already tugging his boots on. They’d be moving in three hundred and fifteen seconds. If he pushed the batmobile’s engine, they could be in the city in another seven minutes after that.

“Of course, no donation comes entirely string-free, but hey that’s Gotham philanthropy for you.” Joker jauntily leaned on the stack of explosives, shaking his head in a parody of contrition even as he brandished a remote with a single comically large red button. “So here’s how tonight’s going to work-”

Behind him, nearly out entirely in the darkness and in flickering movement that Batman would have missed if he hadn't glanced back at the monitor to see if he could judge anything about the maybe-warehouse's exterior from the angle of the falling moonlight, a shape dropped down behind the Joker.

"Every time I press this here button-" Gloved hands twisted and curled in dramatic arcs that gave only frames of movement behind him, but it was enough to glimpse leather, red cloth, and dark steel.

It was enough to drive a spike of ice deep into Batman's gut.

Before a stained-satin thumb could so much as twitch and commit whatever atrocity the Joker had planned for the evening, his own earlier joke cut him off.

Bang .

Blood erupted from Joker's throat, first in a thick mist, and then in a fountain of semi-arterial flow. Bright, brutal red pouring down his chest like a ragged, liquid-velvet tie. He swayed for a moment and his eyebrows scrunched, mouth moving weakly like he wasn't entirely sure what had just happened.

Bruce could relate, even as a wretched suspicion scratched at the base

of his skull.

Footsteps echoed over the broadcast, and Joker turned sluggishly to meet them, one hand fumbling in his coat for some sort of trick or maybe just a gun, but the motion ended sharply with a *crack* of bone as a boot collided with a leg, just above the knee.

The Joker dropped, his good leg giving way under weakness and weight, one hand still holding that remote tightly enough to bend the casing even as blood continued to spill down the back of his jacket.

Left in view, no longer hidden by the Joker's willowy frame, was a painfully familiar stranger.

Alvin.

It wasn't explicitly obvious. But he was wearing the same armoured suit, jacket, and mask that he had the other night and even through the poor quality camera, Bruce could see the rusty stains. The only real difference was now he had the hood up, casting his face in shadow.

The handgun was new, though.

For a moment Bruce thought that might be it, and it was almost enough to get him moving again to finish with his equipment, but

then Alvin moved again, stepping closer and raising the gun to fire another two shots, one head, one chest. Professional.

Thorough.

Only then, with the Joker well and truly harmless at his feet did Alvin bother to look up. Right into the camera lens. And he froze.

"*Shit.*"

Another bloom of questions at the single word, even as Batman's instincts kicked back into gear and Robin stepped up to peer at the screen with a hiss. Had Alvin *not* been aware of the broadcast?

Alvin closed the distance quickly, lifting the camera and presumable tripod in one smooth motion that spoke of familiarity with the equipment. This close, with the lighting overhead, the shadows of his hood were deeper, heavier, and only the tense set of his jaw and the barest glint of lenses remained visible.

"I'm not sorry."

And the footage shut off, leaving behind a few moments of blackness before static overtook the screen.

Kevlar itched slightly against the tips of Bruce’s fingers and his cape curled quietly around his ankles. Behind him, his son bounced on the balls of his feet, teeth bared.

“We’re going after him, right?”

Any other time, the question would be easy. And despite all the mysteries and leads to chase, it still nearly was.

“Bombs first, and we’ll see how the night goes.”

Priorities. People, always before anything else. Then answers and, if he was lucky, a chance to save a lost boy from his own pain before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Gun violence, death, blood

Good evening folks!

Hope you enjoyed the surprise POV switch here! This is like the fourth version of this epilogue I've written but they've always been from Bruce rather than Tim for ReasonsTM. This is also notably shorter than chapters have been for a long time, but it's more in line with how things were when this story started out, and I kind of like that (though as always I reserve the right to come back and mess about at any time :p). On this epilogue specifically, I sure remember why in several versions the Joker doesn't get any lines out and its because I Dislike trying to write his dialogue. Oh well, at least its not like I'll ever have to do it

again :)

I got pretty much everything big and Emotional out in the last chapter's notes, but just to reiterate, I am so stoked about getting this done! And I'm so thankful for all of the support I've gotten over the last few years. This has been great, you've all been amazing.

I've mentioned it before as well, but the sequel will be all other POVs and will happen whenever I get appropriately Got by the urges to write it. Definitely trickier to stay on top of than this fic, I suspect, but I'm very much looking forward to working with the stylistic flexibility and I'm Very excited to get to the ending of that fic too. It may just take a while :p

Thank you for everything, and I hope you have a wonderful rest of the week <3

Works inspired by this one

Running Rings ‘Round by justapoorboy

Reunions by Anonymous

[Restricted Work] by cassiopeia721

(Time Is) Ever-Flowing by orphan_account

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!